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PLANET

stories

FALL

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VALKYRIE from the **VOID**

A Novelet of Stellar Savagery
by **BASIL WELLS**

CITADEL of the **GREEN DEATH**
by **EMMETT McDOWELL**

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Fall Issue 1948



Vol. III, No. 12

20c per copy

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Heat rays flickering about his hoary head, his frail and withered body unbelievably conformed by half a dozen force fields, his musculature rigid and his nerves screaming from a frightful overcharge, the genial editor of PS once again welcomes you to his sunny sanctum.

Bunch of good letters this Ish. So why don't we let you at 'em? Okay—here are the winners. Jack Clements, first, pick one. Marion Zimmer, second, pick two. Boff Perry, third, pick three. Let's go!

—PLANET'S ELECTRIFIED PTERODACTYL

HOOT MCGOOT RIDES AGAIN

DEAR EDITOR:

2410 Wichita,
Austin, Texas

I say, auld chap—the summah version of jolly PS seems to be up and about, eh what? Righto. Likewise bloody good and blooming. Raurther!

Y'know, Payne (I call 'im Payne, and he calls me—well, let it pass, let it pass; thank you, Mr. Thurber), I removed my file of PLANET from the vault the other day and spent a nostalgic afternoon flitting about the hallowed pages. La Vizi used to be a pretty gay place, nice and full of screwballs. *Sevenball*, of cawse, is just another word for *individual*—humman? Ah me. Asimov has gone on to become an author. Stoy is out in the wild—a chemist, I think. Wonder what Lesser is doing? Oliver is still around, regretably. He writes like an aged pedant.

There were a lot of good yarns in them thar days—more than at present in PS. On the other hand, there was nothing remotely comparable to Bradbury, either. One reason why there were more real stories then is, in a superoplastic capsule, *ATMOSPHERE*. Fast action is fine and dandy, but kinda dull in a colorless vacuum. Take Simmons' *Z-Day on Centauri*, for example. It's a nice, formula-adventure story that happens to involve a spaceship. Ho-hum—Hoot McGoot blasted off in the *Madball V*, kissed his girl, and landed on Blott. Presumably, he went through space. What about it? What about that awful immensity through which no man has ever gone? Isn't it worth a paragraph, maybe? Men have been sailing the seas for quite a spell now, but did you ever read a sea story that forgot to tell you how the sea looked, how it *felt* to be out there? Good stufansy doesn't require a bucket of adjectives; true. It does require a certain sensitivity and awareness.

Ray Bradbury is a beautiful writer. Every story by him seems to be better than the last—simply because they are all so perfectly done that the reader feels that Ray couldn't have possibly written a better story. It got to be almost amusing when I read that poignant book of his, *Dark Carnival*.

His *Pillar of Fire* this issue is no exception. It is a fine story, a brilliant allegory, a sad truth. It's sharp with impressions and feelings, clear with a sense of being alone among many people. The "dead man", of course, was the only one who was alive! The story is supposed to take place in "2349". I suspect that Bradbury had another, closer date in mind. . . .

(Continued on page 120)



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CITADEL OF THE GREEN DEATH

By **EMMETT McDOWELL**

JOEL HAKKYT stirred impatiently in the prisoner's chair. His features, homely, strong-boned and intelligent, were inscrutable. But he didn't know how much longer he could bottle up his indignation. It had been accumulating all during his trial. Now this delay!

The machines had been whisked from the chamber. The investigating psychologist should have returned with his verdict minutes ago. What was wrong?

Joel glanced at his parents, at his wife. They were the only spectators, the three of them sitting stiffly in the front row of benches.

Doctor Hakkyt refused to meet his son's eyes. A plump, tall man, the doctor looked stonily out the windows at the park-like grounds surrounding the Hall of Justice. He was president of Clear Springs Community, and his angry red expression said plainly as words that his son had disgraced him.

Mrs. Hakkyt dabbed at cold eyes with a scrap of handkerchief. Joel's glance passed over her swiftly and on to his wife.

She sat next to his mother with a notebook on her knee, a pencil poised in her hand. Joel's wife was a specialist in creative writing, and all through his trial, she



The pseudo-Emperor cursed, struggled, begged for his life.

At the coldly gleaming Experimental Station they flung this choice in Outlaw Joel Bakkyt's teeth: "Grinding, endless slavery on Asgard, that Alpha Centauri hell—or a writhing, screaming guinea-plg's death here?" He chose Asgard, naturally. But what was natural—on Asgard?

had watched him with the same impersonal curiosity she might have bestowed on some animal, jotting down his reactions.

In sudden disgust, Joel wondered why he had consented to marry her. It had been her looks, he supposed. She had a sensual rather pretty face...

A panel behind the bench clicked loudly in the silence. The guard stood up, saying: "Attention, please."

It was a useless formality, because everyone's eyes had jerked instantly to the slowly opening door.

The investigating psychologist bustled in, sat down behind his desk. He arranged his black gown with a tug, rattled the papers in his hand.

"An unusual case," he began. "Unusual in several respects!" He turned his eyes on Joel's father. "The examination reveals that the prisoner is possessed of a high I.Q. Very high. However, he is completely maladjusted. A dangerous anti-social type. He is to be committed to the Experimental Station at once!"

Joel caught his breath. The Experimental Station!

Criminals and the maladjusted were committed to the Experimental Stations where they were used as guinea pigs by the scientists. They might live for years, surviving experiment after experiment. But inexorably like the early Roman gladiators they met a ghastly fate.

Doctor Hakkyt had risen furiously. "This is preposterous! Think of the notoriety! I'm the president of . . ."

"That will be sufficient!" the investigating psychologist interrupted. "The prisoner is thirty-four years old. This is the third time he's been up for examination. All the rehabilitative measures have failed!"

Doctor Hakkyt sank back muttering into his seat.

The psychologist rattled his papers again, fixed Joel's wife with a softer glance. "Annulment orders for your marriage, Mrs. Hakkyt, have been forwarded to the capitol. You are free."

"Thank you," said the young woman without glancing up from her notes.

The investigating psychologist wiped his sharp features with a handkerchief and said: "Court dismissed."

Joel watched his father and mother rise. They didn't glance at him. The psychologist cleared his throat.

"If you wish to say goodbye to the prisoner. . ."

Doctor Hakkyt wheeled angrily. "That won't be necessary. As far as my wife and I are concerned, the prisoner is already dead!"

Pompously, he took Mrs. Hakkyt's arm, steered her to the exit. Joel's wife closed her notebook with a snap, trotted out after them without a backward glance.

Only their scent, that unique volatile compound that was as expressive to Joel Hakkyt's sensitive nostrils as a picture, lingered behind.

It was atavistic, Joel supposed, but his sense of smell was as acute as any hound's!

JOEL shrugged, rose from the prisoner's chair. He looked big, hurly beside the fragile guard. There was something appealing about his strong homely features—a quizzical directness, an honesty.

"Come along," said the guard.

Joel's nostrils flared as he caught the guard's scent for the first time. It was man-like and yet alien—a curious unrecognizable smell that raised the hair on the back of his neck!

The guard seemed unaware of Joel's scrutiny. He was a thin elderly man in the Republic's blue and yellow uniform. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses.

"Come along," the guard repeated, and Joel permitted himself to be led into the corridor that ran back to the cells.

The door had scarcely closed on the courtroom, when the guard said in an altered tone, "Keep walking. And don't say a word once we reach the cells. Spy recorders have been installed in all of them!"

Joel came to a dead stop. "Who are you?"

"Keep walking!" The blue uniformed guard tugged in panic at Joel's elbow.

"One of our men'll contact you at the Experimental Station. Don't mention this to anyone!" He gulped slightly. "This is going to hurt some. Don't be startled; it's necessary."

As he talked, he jabbed a needle through Joel's sleeve into his arm.

Joel jumped. "Damn! What are you up to?" He yanked free, swung angrily on the guard.

"Only a tattoo mark. Isn't visible except under black light. Then it fluoresces green."

"But why?"

"Identification. Shows you're a legitimate maladjustment case and not a government spy."

"But what. . ."

"No time now. Wait until our man contacts you. Explain everything. Remember, not a word when we reach the cell block!"

He pushed aside the panel at the far end of the hall. The opening revealed a second corridor lined with small iron-barred cubicles. None of them were tenanted.

Joel Hakkyt moved into his own familiar cell where he had been lodged during his trial. The gate clanged shut.

The guard removed his glasses, polished them nervously as he gave Joel a warning look.

For the first time Joel could see the guard's eyes.

They had no pupils, no color, only a weird flickering light in their depths that glimmered like candle flame!

Joel could feel his stomach contract like a fist. The alien smell filled his nostrils. He took an involuntary backwards step, his heart hammering against his ribs.

The guard wasn't human!

Before Joel could question him the guard retreated through the door, hastily shut-

ting it with a click. Joel sank to the edge of his bunk.

Where did the guard come from?

A mutation? The Eugenics Board would never have allowed a mutation to survive. Joel himself had escaped their vigilance only because it had been impossible to detect his abnormally heightened vision and sense of smell at birth.

Then what was the creature?

It wasn't a native to Mars or Venus. Their dominant life forms had been exterminated centuries ago. Perhaps it hailed from the Centaurian planetary system. He sat up abruptly at the thought.

A Centaurian?

The Republic had established a colony on Asgard, the second planet of Alpha Centauri A. Joel had seen the three-dimensional reels of its weirdly lovely jungles and grotesque species of plant life.

But so far Asgard's dominant life form had escaped detection!

The Republic's exploring parties had stumbled across strange empty little villages with fires smouldering on clay hearths and the food still hot in clay vessels. Yet not a glimpse of the inhabitants had they ever been able to catch.

By some uncanny means, the natives always eluded them like wraiths.

Anthropologists had been able to reconstruct a theoretical Centaurian thought from the evidence that he left behind—artifacts, huts, footprints. He was man-like, they said, and walked upright. He weighed between a hundred and a hundred and twenty pounds, this theoretical creature. He was in a primitive stage of development possessing neither writing nor art.

There was only one thing they couldn't explain. That was why nobody had ever seen one!

Joel grinned sourly. He was letting his imagination run away with him.

AT nineteen hours a green panel glowed on the rear wall and letters formed on the glass.

SUPPER—PRESS BUTTON.

Joel pressed the indicated button. The panel folded out like a secretary, revealing sanitary food containers which had been delivered via a slot.

He ate slowly. When he had finished he

dropped the empty containers down the disposal chute and stretched out on his bunk.

All at once, he sat up snapping his fingers. Why hadn't that occurred to him earlier?

From the wall above the foot of his bunk, he pulled down a screen about a metre square, dialed a number on the prison intercommunicator.

A pale rose glow spread through the screen. Then the prim starched figure of a girl sprang out in three-dimensional reality.

The girl was working at a desk in the warden's office. Joel felt as if he were looking at her through a window in his cell.

She said, "Yes?"

"May I be connected with the film library?"

The girl opened a file, glanced at a card. After a moment, she said, "That will be all right." She dialed a number and said, "Here's your party."

The screen went agitated like the surface of a pond, then cleared again, disclosing a dry thin woman.

"Clear Springs Public Film Library."

Joel said, "I'd like to see whatever is available on Asgard, second planet of Alpha Centauri A. Travel films, history, exploration records..."

The librarian gave a short brittle laugh. "That's a large order. Roughly there must be several thousand reels."

Joel hesitated. "A good condensed history then."

She said, "Flagg's *Stellar Venture* is the latest..."

"That'll do."

"One moment, please."

Once more the screen quivered violently. Music, a thin haunting melody, streamed into Joel's cell, through which came the voice of the narrator. The music stopped.

A dull black space ship was forming within the depths of the screen.

JOEL lay back on his bunk, staring into the glowing square. Walls, floor and ceiling receded from consciousness. He was free of the prison as if like Alice he had stepped through a mirror into a world beyond.

"Sa Nels, a Martian of Terran descent,

discovered the stellar drive in 4471," the narrator was saying. "The Republic organized an expedition to the trinary system of Proxima Centauri, Alpha Centauri A and B, our nearest neighbors; and Sa Nels was put in charge."

The narrator's voice droned on. Joel scarcely heard him.

These were government films of the actual take-off of the Vega, Sa Nel's ship. It lay in its cradle in the midst of the sandy red Martian wastes. The crew were at their posts. Sa Nels waved at the camera, climbed into the Vega. The ports were sealed.

There was a blinding flash from the stern of the ship. It rose slowly, crazily in the rarified Martian atmosphere, gained momentum until it was a thin needle-like streak and dwindled in the flick of an eye and disappeared.

Joel let out his breath with a sigh. He had been clenching his fist until his fingers ached. The first ship to reach the stars!

It had been twenty-one years, he recalled after the Vega passed beyond radio contact before a wondering Earth had heard from them again.

Twenty-one years compressed into as many minutes in the film unreeled before Joel's eyes. He saw the blood red ball that was Proxima Centauri swim into view on the scanner. He sighted the yellow-white star of Alpha Centauri A and its orange twin, Alpha Centauri B.

He landed with the expedition on the second planet of Alpha Centauri A and saw the deserted stone villages of the invisible natives, the thick flesh-like Nigel trees, mobile carnivorous plants that stalked the members of the crew like crawling land octopi...

The rest of the film was taken up with the improvement in stellar travel, the establishment of the first colony on Asgard and its slow growth.

Joel was fascinated. If he had lived during an earlier age, he would have run off to sea.

As it was he had stowed away as a lad aboard a tramp spacer outward bound for Mars. But he had been discovered before the ship cleared.

That was the first time he had been brought up before the examining board.

Joel had wanted to become an astro-

geophysicist above all else, but his aptitude tests had revealed a remarkable ability with animals. He had been assigned to the government stock farms instead.

He switched off the telescreen. He had discovered nothing that connected the strange humanoid guard with Centaurus and he had put himself into the mood of despair that engulfed him whenever he contemplated his joyless future.

It was almost dawn before he dropped off into a troubled sleep.

II

THE SOUND OF HIS CELL DOOR opening awakened Joel the next morning. It was a new guard, he saw with disappointment, a perfectly normal human, smelling of tobacco, sweat and stale clothes—a man-like unmistakable odor.

They went into an elevator and so to the roof where the police helicopter was waiting. Joel climbed into the cab, looked out the window as the 'copter rose smoothly into the air.

The rim of the sun was showing above a low range of wooded hills. The town of Clear Springs was bathed in limpid morning light. With a catch in his throat he caught sight of the sun deck of his own home. They would still be abed there—his mother and father and his ex-wife.

It was strange to think that he'd never see them again. It made him realize the finality of this journey.

A human guinea pig!

They had been traveling for several hours when his eyes were attracted by the sparkle of sunlight dead ahead. Then he made out a huge plastic dome cupping hundreds of acres.

The Experimental Station!

The police 'copter lit with a slight jar on the thick green sward of the landing field. Joel climbed down stiffly.

Seen from the ground, the structure took his breath away. It was a tremendous dome of clear plastic like a glass beehive. Thousands of tiny figures could be seen moving about its many levels.

No tree grew around the hive. On all sides gently rolling meadows studded with grazing sheep, goats and cattle fell away for miles.

He began to appreciate why no prisoner

had escaped from the station in over a hundred years!

A guard challenged them at the entrance.

Joel's escort produced his papers and the circular plastic gate rolled ponderously aside.

They walked down a short corridor and were challenged a second time. Joel heard the gate roll back, roll shut. A feeling of helplessness swept over him.

It was the door of life, he thought, that had shut behind him.

THE white-suited attendant who had signed the receipt for Joel led him into one of the opaque offices, where a stout man in a white smock sat behind a black plastic desk.

"A new arrival, sir," said the attendant. "Name of Joel Hakkyt from Clear Springs Community. Convicted on two counts. Maladjustment and manslaughter."

"Ah," wheezed the stout man and eased himself back in his chair. Joel noticed that his eyebrows slanted upward giving a sardonic cast to his rubicund countenance.

The attendant laid the papers softly on the ebony desk and withdrew.

There was a strong antiseptic smell to the station. It clung to everything, the offices and corridors, the inmates and attendants. It was so strong that it baffled Joel's keen scent.

"Manslaughter." The stout man, picked up the papers, glanced at them briefly. "I see you underwent examination as a child for abnormal vision."

"Yes," agreed Joel. "I've a much higher percentage of light sensitive rods in my eyes than average. I've always been able to see about as well after dark as a cat."

"What did the Eugenics Board say?"

Joel's homely features broke into a grin. "They had their hands full explaining how they let me slip past when I was born."

"There wasn't anything done about it?"

"Oh, I was put under observation. They decided it was a harmless aberration, but I was forbidden to reproduce."

"But I see you were allowed to marry?"

"My wife was not considered good breeding stock either."

"I see." The fat man pursed his lips, gave Joel an appraising glance. "How did you happen to kill your superior at the State Cattle Farm?"

Joel's face darkened.

"It was an accident. I hit him with my fist. I hit him too hard and broke his neck."

"Roll up your sleeve!"

Joel did so in surprise. He glanced down. With a start he saw that the puncture where the humanoid guard had inserted the needle was fluorescing a vivid green. The room must be bathed in black light! Involuntarily he jerked down the sleeve.

"It's all right," said the stout man. "It's what I was looking for."

"What does it mean?" Joel asked when he had recovered from his surprise.

"Mean? It means that you're a legitimate maladjustment case and not a damned spy sent in here by the Senate."

"But..."

The fat man lifted his hand. He said, "I'm Doctor Chedwick, Emile Chedwick. I'm in charge of induction. Sit down, my boy."

Joel sank suspiciously into a relaxer. Doctor Chedwick drummed on the shiny black desk top.

"Understand," he began, "the men and women who are sentenced to the Experimental Station expect to die. And sooner or later they all do die. Some of them rather horribly."

Joel began to fidget. He knew this. Everyone knew it.

"What you don't know," said Doctor Chedwick almost as if reading Joel's mind, "is that there is a chance for you to escape this!"

Joel went rigid. He leaned forward, his eyes fastened on the pale gray eyes of the man behind the desk.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. There's an acute labor shortage on Asgard, second planet of Alpha Centauri A. Last year the planters petitioned the Senate to assign them a number of malcontents from the Experimental Stations. There has been an alarming increase in maladjusted cases recently. More than the stations could handle. The Senate jumped at the chance to get rid of the excess."

In spite of his eagerness Joel felt a vague shock. "But that's slavery."

Doctor Chedwick shrugged. "Would you rather work on the plantations or die in some experiment?"

"Why—why—" Joel burst out, "I'd rather work!"

"Exactly. So would the others."

Joel said, "But why the tattoo mark? Why all the secrecy? And the guard. What is the guard?"

"The less you know about that the safer you'll be." Doctor Chedwick's mouth shut like a trap. He stabbed at a button on his desk. "You'll be contacted on Asgard. Everything will be explained then. Meanwhile say nothing about the tattoo mark. Say nothing about our conversation to any one. Understand?"

Joel nodded.

The door opened and the attendant reappeared.

Doctor Chedwick said, "Put this man in 745B. He's had training and practical experience in animal husbandry and he's husky as an ox. He's to be shipped to Asgard with the next labor battalion. Take him away."

THE attendant turned Joel over to a guard who escorted him from the offices into the clear plastic division of the dome. It was like stepping out into space. He sucked in his breath. He could see straight down through level after level for hundreds of feet.

Dormitories lined the passage on either hand. He could see men and women asleep in their bunks, sitting at tables, taking showers or dressing. The transparent walls were soundproof, and Joel experienced the peculiar sensation of walking through an animated silence.

They were approaching a small ante chamber that must be a guard room. Half a dozen armed and uniformed men were sitting about a table playing cards.

Beyond the transparent walls of the guard room Joel could see into another chamber. It was long and low and lined with bunks like the fo'c's'le of a spaceship. Forty or fifty people in gray were milling about two men on the floor who seemed to be doing their best to murder each other.

"Here's a new guinea pig for the labor battalion, Captain," said Joel's escort, pushing him into the guard room.

With a grunt of annoyance, a tall man rose from the table and surveyed Joel with bleak gray eyes. His blue tunic was un-

buttoned at the throat, his holster pushed around in back.

"Papers," he snapped.

Joel's escort handed over a folder, which the captain took to his desk.

Joel's eyes returned to the next room. It was like being in a soundproof broadcasting cage, watching two men batter at each other beyond the glass.

One of the men had the other by the throat and was throttling him. The strangler's arms were corded; his face shone with sweat; there was an insane fixed glare in his eyes. The other man's tongue was protruding, as he tore at his assailant's wrists.

"My God!" Joel burst out. "Aren't you going to break it up?"

"Let them kill themselves," said the captain indifferently. He opened the door. "In with you," he said and shoved Joel into the melee.

Bedlam burst on his ears as he stumbled into the room.

A woman was screaming in a shrill hysterical voice. The men milled about pushing to see better. No one paid any attention to him.

He clenched his fists. He couldn't stand by and watch a man murdered.

Impulsively, he shouldered through the press, got his hands on the strangler's wrists, tore them away.

"Here!" somebody yelled. "Leave 'em be, you fool!"

He ignored the warning, heaved the man from his victim.

The fellow came to his feet, stared at him with that glazed intensity as if he didn't realize what had happened. Then without a sound he hurled himself at Joel's throat!

III

JOEL WASN'T TAKEN ENTIRELY by surprise. But the ferocity of the attack drove him back a few steps. He wrapped his arms about the man's shoulders and hung on.

A furious animal snell filled his nostrils. The man was berserk, his breath whistling through his teeth as he strove to tear himself free. Then like a mad dog, he sank his teeth in Joel's shoulder.

Joel gave a yelp of surprise, pushed him off, bit him with his clubbed fist.

His assailant reeled backwards, staggered to his knees. He was a giant of a fellow with shaggy black hair and curious yellow gray eyes.

Joel was on him like a tiger, smashing his fist into the giant's unprotected face.

The man lunged over backwards, rolled to his belly and tried to push himself to his hands and knees.

Joel kicked him behind the ear.

The giant's arms collapsed. His face struck the floor and he lay still.

The other prisoners had drawn back against the bunks. There was a minute of stunned silence. Then with whoops of delight they crowded around slapping his back, shaking his hand.

Joel was too surprised to utter a word.

The man who had been throttled, was sitting up massaging his throat. He regarded Joel with a puzzled expression.

"Thanks," he wheezed painfully, "but what made you risk your neck?"

"Risk my neck?"

"You're new, aren't you?" asked the man, pulling himself to his feet and holding out his hand. "I'm Nick Thorp."

Joel introduced himself. Thorp, he saw, was short and husky with prematurely gray hair and blue eyes bright as bits of china.

"You've made yourself a wicked enemy," Thorp observed, prodding the giant with his toe. "That's Walt Eriss."

"Walt Eriss?" Joel's green eyes widened. Walt Eriss' trial had created the sensation of the decade.

Walt Eriss had been a brilliant surgeon, but with a pathological twist. A modern Jack the Ripper who delighted in torturing his patients. He had killed forty-three women by his own confession before he was apprehended!

Joel stared at the hulking form as if it were some monster. "But why were the others letting him throttle you?" he asked Nick Thorp. "Why didn't they stop him?"

"They're afraid of him."

"But they could've ganged him..." Joel stopped with his mouth open.

A bell had begun to ring with an ear-splitting clangor!

Muttered exclamations burst from the prisoners as they exchanged alarmed glances. The bell continued to ring.

"What's happening?" Joel asked.

Nick Thorp shook his grizzled head. "I

don't know. But the bell's a signal for us to line up at our bunks."

Joel realized that the other prisoners had formed in a row down the walls. He glanced about uncertainly.

"There's a vacant bunk beside mine," Nick Thorp suggested.

Joel gratefully took his place beside Thorp. The bell fell silent. Everyone was staring through the wall into the guardroom.

The guards had abandoned their card game, he saw. They were straightening their uniforms, buttoning their tunics. He could see the passage beyond and two men making their way along it.

One, he recognized, was Doctor Chedwick, white-frosted and moon-faced. The other was a short man with a truculent walk. He was wearing the green uniform of a space man.

A low excited buzz arose from the prisoners. Joel caught words here and there. "Asgard! So soon!"

He felt tight with excitement and glanced surreptitiously at the girl beside him.

She was an exotic elfin creature, even in the shapeless gray coveralls. Her black eyes and hair, the smooth olive of her complexion lent her the appearance of an Arab. He wondered what crime she had committed that had condemned her to the Experimental Station.

Then the door to the guardroom was flung violently open. The captain appeared in the entrance and shouted, "Attention!"

THE whispering ceased as the guards in their peacock blue and yellow filed into the dormitory. They were carrying a long plastic chain, which they stretched down the center of the floor. About every yard, Joel saw that a metal collar had been linked to the chain.

Doctor Chedwick came through the door with the green-uniformed spaceman beside him.

"This is Sam Mullin," he said indicating the spaceman. "Third mate of the *Zenith*. Mister Mullin will be responsible for you while you're aboard the *Zenith*. You're to be embarked at once..."

Joel's heart leaped against his ribs. Even the archaic title of "mister" had a heady sound. It was a tradition among spacemen,

he knew. Only officers of Star Ships were called "mister."

"What's this?" Doctor Chedwick interrupted himself catching sight of the unconscious figure of Eriss on the floor.

"There was a fight, Doctor," the captain hastened to explain. "The new man and Walt Eriss."

"Hakkyt knocked out Eriss?"

The captain nodded.

Doctor Chedwick shot Joel a startled glance. "Watch those fists of yours, young man. You're too free with them." Then to the captain, "Revive Eriss and shackle the prisoners."

Joel noticed that the guards were careful to fasten one of the collars about the ex-surgeon's neck before they broke a vial of some liquid and held it under his nose.

Eriss opened his eyes and sat up groggily. Then his gaze fastened on Joel. With a bellow of rage he was on his feet, charging across the room like a mad bull.

Three men, hanging onto the chain, snubbed him up short!

Eriss wheeled furiously, found himself facing half a dozen drawn paralyzers and brought up with a curse.

Joel could see the veins throb in the giant's temples. But the captain turned indifferently to the other prisoners. "Line up beside the chain."

Joel took his place between the black-haired girl and Nick Thorp. The collar was snapped about his throat. In single file and with a good deal of tripping, the prisoners, chained neck to neck, tramped through the door.

Doctor Chedwick left them at the main corridor, but the Captain and Mister Mullin helped the guards herd them into a lift.

They dropped soundlessly level after level until they were well below the surface. At length the lift stopped, the doors opened.

To his surprise Joel saw that there was a pneumatic station beneath the dome, and a train was waiting in the tube.

They were shepherded into a coach. They had a good deal of trouble arranging themselves in the seats because of the chain linking them together, but at last it was done.

Captain Goplerud blew a whistle and swung inside the car. The door slammed

shut. With a powerful surge and a whoosh the train shot off.

Joel found himself beside Nick Thorp. "Where do you suppose we're going?" he asked breathlessly.

"Nu York," Thorp replied. "All the Star Ships berth at the White Plains spaceport. We're lucky. The *Zenith's* a crack luxury liner. No being battered down in the hold of some stinking freighter for us."

"You've been to space before?"

Thorp turned his incredibly blue eyes on Joel. "For twenty-three years. Rocket ships and Star Ships. I never thought I'd see space again..."

Joel eyed the battered gray-haired spaceman with increased respect. Here was a man who'd seen the stews of Venusport, breathed the murky air of Jovopolis, gazed out on the frigid whiteness of Pluto.

"Then you've been to Asgard?"

"Many's the time. Wait 'til you see it, lad. Jungles and rain and crawling plants that can pluck a man off the ground and devour him quick as a cat!"

Joel was fascinated. The train slid along with a monotonous roar that shut them in a cell of privacy.

"Who's the girl?" he asked, nodding at the elfin sloe-eyed brunette in the seat ahead.

Nick Thorp's eyes twinkled. "Tamis Ravitz. She used to be a dancer. Poisoned her dancing partner in a fit of jealous rage. So I've heard."

Joel was shocked and looked it.

Thorp's battered features cracked into a broad grin. "We're a rum bunch. None of us can afford to throw stones at the others."

Joel felt the rebuke in his words and reddened.

THE spaceman had slumped in the seat and closed his eyes. The dull roar of the train had a soothing quality. But Joel was too keyed up to relax.

He kept thinking of the humanoid guard and the fluorescent tattoo mark on his elbow and Doctor Chedwick saying: "The less you know about them, the safer you'll be. Someone will contact you at Asgard. Don't mention our conversation to anyone..."

A buzzer began to whirr softly. The

train braked. The guards rose and shouted, "On your feet! On your feet! Line up in the aisle."

The train whooshed to a soft stop as if it had run into a foam rubber cushion. The doors slid back, letting in a thundering bedlam of sound.

Joel found himself staring out into a vast grained hall lit by harsh violet light. Streams of beetle-like robot trucks, piled high with baggage, darted along elevated roadways. People were everywhere, a crazy throng like a disturbed colony of ants.

He drew a ragged breath, feeling his heart thud against his ribs. The metal collar jerked against his throat and he fell into step.

They shuffled out of the coach onto a long ramp. A huge red sign directly ahead caught Joel's eyes. It's flashing letters were at least ten feet high.

CENTAURUS FLIGHT
TAKE OFF—15:52
STAR SHIP ZENITH

The file of prisoners made straight for the sign, entered a narrow corridor that sloped downward like a tunnel. From the tunnel they emerged into the maw of a huge pit. Joel rubbed his eyes. He'd never seen the rocket pits before.

The Zenith, a dull black, bullet-shaped monster, rested on her fins with her nose pointing straight up towards the starry black firmament. Gangplanks like airy cobwebs spanned the gap between the Star Ship and the blackened concrete walls.

The file of prisoners crawled out along one of the gangplanks. They were in the center of it, when Joel felt Nick Thorp's fingers close like a vise on his shoulder.

"Look! Overhead! We're having distinguished company this voyage!"

Joel glanced up.

ABOVE and to one side another gangplank crossed the gap. A stout man was leaning on the rail and watching the prisoners. Beside him stood a young woman with the warm beautiful face of a Venusian dancing girl.

She was clad in a short green coat with exaggerated square-cut shoulders, and for one shocked moment Joel thought that she

didn't have on anything beneath it. Then he realized that she must be wearing shorts which the coat was just long enough to hide.

For the rest, he received a swift impression of long shapely tanned legs, sooty lashes, green eyes and hair. *Green hair!*

Then their eyes met—and met and held. There was a swift outleaping of spirit between them, an indescribable feeling of kinship, of recognition. Joel felt shaken, bewitched. A smile was trembling on the girl's half-parted lips.

And then he had been carried into the ship and he couldn't see her any longer.

"Who were they?" he asked unsteadily.

"Humphrey Cameron, Governor of Asgard," Thorp explained. "The girl was his daughter, Priscilla Cameron."

Tamis Ravitz said over her shoulder, "Did you see that hair? *Green!* She's been the talk of Terra."

Joel thought the dancer sounded envious. They were shuffling single file down a long corridor that led straight into the bowels of the ship. A vague rumbling made the deck tremble beneath his feet. He heard shouted orders, the sound of the gangplank being run in.

His face whitened in the raw violet light. All thoughts of the green haired Priscilla Cameron were driven from his mind.

From the passage the prisoners were herded into a long low chamber outfitted with tables. Here they were unchained.

Mister Mullin glanced at his chronometer. "Take-off in fifteen minutes," he warned. "Strap yourselves into your bunks."

He disappeared at a run. The guards filed out of the prisoner's mess locking the door behind them.

"Come along," Thorp urged Joel as a wild clangor broke out from the stem to stern of the Zenith. "We've time for a quick look around before we get settled."

Joel followed him wordlessly into the sleeping quarters. Beyond the toilet were the washrooms and that was all. A second bell rang just as they flung themselves into empty bunks.

The rumble of the tubes mounted into a furious roar. A trip hammer struck Joel in the chest, pinned him into the cushion. He gasped, strained to inflate his lungs.

The Zenith was off!

IV

JOEL FELT HIMSELF GROW heavier, heavier. His arms were lead. The sweat glistened on his homely drawn features. His green eyes lost their sparkle.

After what seemed hours, he heard Nick Thorp croak from his bunk overhead, "Watch y'self. Stellar drive! Any minute!"

Joel felt a surge of unreasoning fear. A bell rang suddenly.

"That's it!" Thorp warned. "Lie still."

As suddenly as it had struck, the acceleration ceased. A terrifying sensation of weightlessness possessed him. He felt as if he were falling—falling! He wanted to spring from the bunk, but remembered Thorp's warning.

Startled cries burst from the passengers. Several of them jumped up. From the corner of his eye Joel saw them shoot to the overhead where they hung kicking. Then the artificial gravity came on and they fell back to the deck a great deal faster than they'd gone up.

Thorp climbed down. "You can get up now."

Joel scrambled to his feet. He felt light, giddy. Nick Thorp took a look at his alarmed countenance and burst into laughter.

"You'll get your space legs quick enough," he assured Joel. "The gravity aboard ship is only about a third of Earth's pull. You'll enjoy it when you get used to it."

Joel had his doubts about that, but when he glanced at the antics of the others he couldn't resist a grin.

A tall red-haired girl kept bounding into the air at each step. Then she slipped all the way over and lit on her bottom.

Just then a whistle blew. Joel wheeled around to find Mister Mullin, the third mate, standing in the door to the mess-room.

"Line up at your bunks," the third ordered. "This is a Star Ship and no stinking freighter. You'll be expected to keep your quarters clean. Inspection every day!"

"Day?" someone asked.

"We're on Earth time. Lights out at twenty-two hours and on again at six. Meals at eight, twelve and eighteen hours."

With the same dispatch he divided the

prisoners into squads of four and assigned each their job.

Joel was relieved to find that he and Nick Thorp were in the same group along with Tamis Ravitz, the dancer, and another man whom Joel didn't know. Their job, it developed, was to keep the mess room in order.

Mister Mullin glanced at his watch, said, "It's eighteen hours now. You can go in to dinner," and trotted out.

Joel realized that he hadn't eaten in hours. He was famished. He hastened into the mess room and sat down at a table along with Nick Thorp and Tamis Ravitz.

The tables, which seated four, were built against the bulkheads down each side of the mess-room. Joel was pressing the button for his meal when a tall handsome man with a black goatee approached them.

"I'm Gustav Liedl," he introduced himself in a cultured voice. "I've been assigned to your squad. I thought it an excellent opportunity to become better acquainted."

"Sit down," Nick Thorp invited, introducing the others.

Joel's dinner arrived just then via a slot in the bulkhead and he addressed himself to it silently. Gustav Liedl, though, dawdled over his meal, talking with Tamis.

"Yes," Joel heard Liedl say in reply to one of Tamis' questions. "I was a professor." He made a rueful face, tugging at his black goatee. "At the Sorbonne. Anthropology was my subject."

"Anthropology?" Joel interrupted. "Then you must have some ideas about the natives of Asgard. What they are? Why no one has ever seen them?"

Liedl regarded Joel with a smile. "Ah, the elusive Centaurians! Yes. I've a theory about the Asgardian natives. I spent several years, you know, studying their villages with the Sorbonne's Asgardian Institute . . ."

Joel, glancing at Tamis, surprised a startled, half-frightened expression on her smooth ivory countenance.

"I've a theory," Liedl repeated, "that the Centaurians are masters of camouflage. I doubt very seriously that they are human. They may even be a quasi-intelligent species of plant life. Have you ever seen the Asgardian jungles, young man?"

"No," Joel admitted.

"Horrible!" Liedl said. "Plants with

snaky tendrils like jointless arms. And they aren't rooted. They're capable of independent motion. It's amazing the number of Asgardian species that can move around freely as mammals."

Tamis said gaily, "Then you think the anthropologists have been looking for a man-like animal when all the time the natives have been plants who crept off into the jungle and hid?"

"Exactly!"

"Sounds like a reasonable explanation," Thorp admitted. "I've seen those Asgardian jungles. Crawling, thrashing masses of vegetation." He shook his head. "It gives a body the creeps."

"But how can anything live in that jungle?" Joel protested.

Liedl said triumphantly: "Nothing could! *Nothing but plants!*"

FIFTEEN minutes before twenty-two hours, a warning bell rang and the lights dimmed. Nick Thorp showed Joel the clothes locker where he could secure sleepers.

The lights went out while Joel was taking his shower. He switched on the dryer in the dark.

After a few seconds his eyes began to adjust. There was a dim night lamp in the mess room beyond the fo'cs'le. Joel could see by its reflected light almost as well as he could by day. The only difference was the absence of color. Everything appeared in varying shades of gray like a photograph.

The deadening effect of the chemicals that had been used to purify the air of the Experimental Station was beginning to wear off. A medley of familiar and unfamiliar smells beset his nostrils.

All at once, he halted.

There was something here that shouldn't be. Joel could smell it. A strange alien odor that he'd caught only once before.

It was the same smell that had clung to the humanoid guard!

Joel's nostrils flared, but the odor was so faint that he couldn't tell from whence it came. It might be emanating from any one of the gray figures placidly asleep in the gray bunks.

He moved to his own bunk and lay down, but he couldn't sleep. That strange scent had acted like a dash of cold water.

He didn't know how long he lay there. Hours, it seemed. There was no sound beyond the muted rumble of the *Zemith's* jets, the snores of some of the prisoners.

The temperature had dropped automatically when the lights were extinguished. He adjusted the thermal unit in his sleepers and closed his eyes.

A faint noise from across the fo'cs'le brought them open again instantly.

The gray elfin figure of Tamis Ravitz, the dancer, he saw, was rising cautiously from her bunk. She was barefooted, clad in the loose sleepers. She put her hand to her eyes. When it came away, she swept the fo'cs'le with a brief glance.

Joel almost forgot to breathe.

The dancer had done something to her eyes because they glowed faintly with an eerie flame!

Joel's pulse throbbed in his ears. Tamis, he saw, was moving to the next bunk with a soundless cat-like glide. She pointed a slender metal cylinder at the man who lay sleeping there. A bright green spot sprang out on the man's arm!

The tattoo mark!

The cylinder must be a source of black light able to kick fluorescence out of the tattoo marks. What did it mean? Who was Tamis?

From sleeping figure to sleeping figure, the girl glided. Sometimes she found the tattoo mark; sometimes she didn't.

She was approaching Joel's bunk. He forced himself to relax, to breathe evenly as if in a deep sleep.

Then she was hovering over him . . .

Joel's hand closed with a crushing grip about her wrist, yanked her off her feet into the bunk!

Tamis uttered one smothered cry, struggled soundlessly. Then she seemed to realize the futility of trying to break free and went limp.

Joel could feel her warm lithe body pinned against him. A strange alien scent filled his nostrils. It was delicate, flower-like, yet utterly alien.

The hair lifted on the back of his neck like the hackles of a dog. He found himself staring deep into the girl's eyes.

They had no pupil, no color, only a weird flickering light in their depths that glimmered like candle flame.

A shudder of revulsion swept over him.

Tamis Ravitz, the dancer, wasn't human!

"Who are you?" Joel asked in a low hoarse voice. "What are you?"

"Please! Softly!" She lay beside him, relaxed, breathing tremulously.

"What are you?" he repeated.

"I can't tell you."

"You'll tell me or I'll turn you over to the guards. What did you do to your eyes?"

"This." She held up a pair of contact lenses. Realistic pupils and iris, Joel saw, had been moulded into the thin slivers of glass. She slipped them quickly into place. Her eyes looked normal, human. They were a perfect disguise.

"What are you?" Joel asked fiercely.

"I'm a mutation."

"No, you're not. I can tell by your scent! You're not human!"

The girl went rigid. Then she began to kick and twist and squirm desperately. Joel pinned down her legs, tightened his grip.

"Do you want me to yell for the guards?"

"No! No!" she breathed in panic.

"Then tell me what this is all about!"

"Have you the tattoo mark?"

JOEL held up his left arm, being careful to retain a grip on her with the other. She trained the cylinder at his elbow. The green spot began to fluoresce.

"Ah," she breathed, relaxing limply. "You are a legitimate maladjustment case. I thought you were a spy . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Joel remained silent.

"Believe me," she said. "I can't tell all. Not now. It's too dangerous. Suppose someone should wake and find me here!"

"What are you?" he repeated stonily.

She hesitated; then, putting her lips against his ear, she breathed, "Ganelon. I'm ganelon—not human. I—I am a native of the planet you humans call Asgard."

"But how have you escaped detection? Why hasn't anyone ever seen a Centaurian?"

"They've seen us—often." There was the suggestion of a giggle in Tamis' low voice. "Perhaps, like Professor Liedl thinks, we're plants."

"No. You're animal. I can tell. Maybe you could fool my eyes but not my nose."

"That nose of yours. It is unfair. You are the mutation!" She gave a silvery chuckle and then clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Please," she begged, "I must go. We are courting discovery!"

"You haven't told me . . ."

"Tomorrow night," she interrupted. Suddenly she stiffened.

Joel heard it too. The faint noise of a heavy body shifting in one of the bunks. His eyes darted across the darkened fo'cs'le!

Walt Eriss, the burly ex-surgeon, had raised himself to one elbow and was staring across into their bunk.

Joel's heart stood still.

How long had Eriss been awake? Had he heard anything?

Joel could distinguish his features clearly but in shadings of gray and black. Eriss' eyes were narrowed, his mouth open in an expression of acute concentration.

"Does he see us?" Tamis breathed in terror.

"No." The word carried only as far as the girl's ear.

With a swift cat-like movement, Tamis slid to her feet and stood like a gray statue.

The shaggy giant was swinging his legs silently over the edge of his bunk. With infinite caution he began to creep towards them.

Joel stood up beside Tamis. Around him there was silence broken only by the low breathing of the prisoners, the faint rumble of the *Zenith's* jets.

He pressed himself against the foot of the bunk, waiting, waiting for that stalking gray giant to creep within reach.

Joel didn't dare breathe. The ex-surgeon was so close that he could see his lips drawn back from his teeth, his blind staring eyes trying to probe the blackness. It took an effort of will to realize that it was too dark for Eriss to see anything.

Another step.

Joel set himself.

Eriss' foot glided forward. He was within reach.

Joel's balled fist came up like a sledgehammer, cracked solidly against the point of Eriss' chin. There was a distinct "pop!" as the ex-surgeon's jawbone broke. His head snapped back, his knees buckled . . .



Joel's balled flat came up like a sledge-hammer.

Joel stepped forward, caught him beneath the arms. Walt Eriss was out cold. "Tamis!" Joel hissed.

"Yes?"

"Grab his feet. We'll lay him in his bunk."

Together they lifted the giant, hauled him across the deck, stowed him in his bed.

"Tomorrow!" Tamis breathed.

Joel saw her slide into her bunk. He retreated across the fo'cs'le and lay down, but his brain was reeling.

What did the presence of a native Centaurian among the malcontents signify? Then he thought of Walt Eriss and a coldness flowed through his veins. How much

had the ex-surgeon overheard of this?

At length in utter emotional exhaustion, he dropped off to sleep.

JOEL was awakened by lights and the angry sound of voices. He opened his eyes. Beams of light were darting here, there. The fo'cs'le seemed overflowing with guards in their gaudy blue and yellow uniforms.

He caught sight of the third mate, tousle-haired and wearing a lemon yellow dressing gown.

The third was saying, "By God, Captain Goplerud! What have we got this voyage? A gang of homicidal maniacs?"

Walt Eriss, Joel saw, was sitting up mumbling inarticulately. His jaw was swol-

len and queerly crooked. The ship's doctor was fussing over him.

"Jaw's broken," the doctor diagnosed.

Captain Goplerud ran his fingers distractedly through his hair. "It's that damned Hakkyt!" he said. "Hakkyt did this."

"Who's Hakkyt?" Mister Mullin wanted to know.

"He's the fellow who beat up Eriss before."

"Where is he?"

"Here," said Joel swinging his feet to the deck.

The beam of a flashlight struck him in the eyes.

"D'you know anything about this?"

Mister Mullin demanded.

Joel shook his head.

"Does anyone know anything about it?" the third mate cried swinging the light beam in a flashing arc.

No one answered.

Captain Goplerud said, "It's no use. They're tight-mouthed as clams."

Mullin cursed, then he said, "Get this man to the hospital."

Walt Eriss was bundled onto a stretcher. The guards moved off. The doctor, Mullin, and Captain Goplerud disappeared with the lights.

Darkness settled once more over the fo'c's'le.

For a moment there was silence. Then a prisoner asked, "What happened?"

A babble of voices answered. Somebody said, "The first I heard was Eriss besting on the door to the guardroom. When it was opened he fainted and they carried him in here."

Thorp leaned down from the bunk above.

"You hurt, Joel?"

"No. Why should I be?"

He was answered by a chuckle.

V

WHEN JOEL SAT DOWN TO breakfast the next morning, Tamis shot him a warning glance from beneath lowered lashes. The pallor of her cheeks was accentuated by her sooty hair. She had the exotic look of some temple harlot strayed through time from ancient Babylonia.

Joel realized suddenly that Professor Liedl was talking to him. "What did you say?" he asked.

"That was a splendid service you performed last night."

"You mean Eriss? But I didn't do it."

"You're too modest." Liedl combed his black van dyke with long brown fingers. "I'm a light sleeper, my boy. And my bunk, you may recall, is next yours."

Joel's face stiffened. He glanced quickly at Tamis. The blood had drained from the girl's countenance.

"What did you hear?" he asked in a frozen voice.

"Don't be embarrassed. Your voices didn't carry, and I'm quite broadminded."

Joel stared at him bewildered. Then the blood began to burn in his cheeks as it dawned on him what Liedl meant. "The old goat," he thought. "So that's what he believes!" And he felt suddenly relieved.

Tamis' lashes were lowered. She bit her nether lip. But whether from amusement or confusion, he couldn't decide.

Fortunately, at that moment the door to the guardroom opened. Mister Mullin stuck his head inside; shouted:

"Get a move on. Inspection in fifteen minutes."

With relief Joel made his escape. He didn't like Liedl's insinuation. He didn't like Liedl. There was something cold and repellant about the black bearded professor. He wondered what crime he had committed to be sentenced to the Experimental Station.

In exactly fifteen minutes Captain Goplerud, accompanied by Mister Mullin entered the prisoners' quarters and lined them up at their bunks. Then a dozen guards filed in and took posts about the fo'c's'le with drawn paralyzers.

Joel wondered uneasily what was up. He wasn't left long in doubt.

A stiff-backed man in a faultless olive-green uniform came through the door. He was wearing the gold sunburst of a Star Ship commander on his breast.

Nick Thorp nudged Joel. "The old man!" he said out of the corner of his mouth. "What the devil brings him down here?"

The commandant ran his eyes over the prisoners. "Very good, Mullin." He turned, said crisply, "This way, Governor."

Governor Cameron and his daughter came through the door together. The governor was a big man with harassed gray eyes. He faced his daughter in obvious exasperation. "Well, here they are, Priscilla. Now why were you so confounded anxious to see them?"

The girl stared around with parted lips. There was a curious eagerness in her green eyes. Then she discovered Joel and he was suddenly conscious of that strange affinity between them.

She wore gold sandals and her toenails and fingernails were lacquered green to match her eyes and hair. She had on a brief pleated skirt, a matching monkey jacket of shimmering rose silk. Her bare midriff, the valley between her breasts, her long legs were smooth golden tan.

"Which one," she asked in a breathless voice, "broke Walt Eriss' jaw?"

"Hakkyt," Mullin informed her briskly. "The big ugly one over there." He pointed at Joel.

Joel found himself staring into the girl's green eyes again. Her lashes were long, black and curly. Her green hair was startling but it wasn't garish.

Without taking her eyes from Joel's, she asked, "Could I see his examination reports? I think he's a . . ."

The governor started nervously. "You're buying no more serfs Priscilla!" he interrupted in haste. "That's final!"

Joel felt his face burn. Buy him? So that's what had brought them down here to the prisoners' quarters!

The girl was staring at her father with a puzzled expression. Something very like a warning flickered between them—something in Governor Cameron's expression. Joel couldn't be sure.

But the girl's eyes widened.

For a moment there was a strained silence. Then she shrugged, turned back to Joel, studied him brazenly detail by detail. He felt naked beneath those probing green eyes. He felt like a prize Hereford bull.

Priscilla said, "Nevertheless, I should like to glance over those reports, Captain." Her voice didn't sound quite natural.

She had slipped into a part, Joel sensed; she was acting. But why? He was too furious to care. He created a shocked disturbance by saying in a cold voice, "I wouldn't be a good buy!"

JAWS dropped among the prisoners. Mister Mullin shouted, "Speak when you're spoken to!"

Priscilla Cameron suddenly smiled. "Why not?" she asked him, silencing the apoplectic mate with a wave.

"I'll damn well see to it that I'm not!"

Priscilla continued to regard him with delighted green eyes. "A challenge!" She turned to the saturnine man wearing the gold sunburst. "How much do you want for him, Commandant?"

The commandant had been observing the scene with cynical gray eyes. He was the perfect Terran type; tall, brown-skinned, erect. Now he said,

"Sorry, Priscilla, but he's not mine to sell. He's the property of the Republic, and the laws are specific. He has to be sold at auction in Eden."

Priscilla said, "Stuff! The governor can authorize the private sale of any serf . . ."

"We're not on Asgard," the commandant reminded her dryly. "This is a Star Ship."

Governor Cameron's visage had grown a rich plum shade. "This farce has gone far enough!" he bellowed furiously. But his anger didn't ring quite true. "I wouldn't authorize the sale of this fellow to my daughter if I could!"

Priscilla said sweetly, "I'll buy him at public auction."

"You will not!"

"Exactly how, pater dear, do you propose to stop me?"

The governor looked as if he were about to have a stroke. Then he swung around, stamped from the fo'c's'le.

It struck Joel as a shade overdrawn. As if Priscilla inadvertently had been about to let something slip, and they'd staged this impromptu fight to cover up.

He heard the commandant say, "Sorry, Priscilla, but I'm due on the bridge."

Priscilla gave Joel a last searching look. Her green eyes sparkled. "I'll see you at the slave block in Eden," she said as she preceded the commandant through the door.

As soon as the guards had withdrawn, Nick Thorp gave a low whistle.

Joel was still furious. "What was she driving at? Why the devil did she pick me out?" He noticed that Professor Liedl was regarding him with a frown. Tamis, too, was watching him, a speculative ex-

pression on her elfin piquant features.

Thorp shrugged. "That's hard to tell. She's got a reputation from one end of Asgard to the other. There's even been talk that she's a mutant."

"Mutant." Joel frowned. She certainly hadn't bred true to type. The standard Terran female had light brown skin, black hair and gray eyes. But hers were green—like cat eyes. Like his own eyes!

A startled expression passed over his likeable rugged features. "By George!" he said aloud. "I wonder!"

Later, when the lights had been extinguished again, he lay awake in the dark—tense, listening. The fo'c's'le was quiet. At length, satisfied that everyone was asleep, he slid from his bunk, crossed the deck to the messroom.

The faint yellow night light was burning. He sat down at a table, lit a cigarette, waited. He was chain-smoking his third cigarette before he heard a step. He glanced up quickly. Tannis was standing in front of him.

Joel said, "I thought you must have gone to sleep."

TAMIS sat down facing him. She'd removed the contact lenses. The liquid luminous depths of her eyes were hypnotic. "No. I couldn't sleep. We need men like you too badly. You especially."

"Me?" he said, startled. "You need me?"

She smiled. "My people, Joel, are a timid race, unwarlike, unaggressive. There are many differences between us. Not of an organic nature. We are fundamentally alike. The differences lie in our culture."

"How do you mean?"

"It is difficult to explain. But your race is so far advanced in the physical sciences that it terrifies us. With your incomprehensible machines you could sweep us into extinction in the wink of an eye."

"When the first Terran ship landed on Asgard, we were careful not to show ourselves. Then we learned a queer thing. Although the Terrans were amazingly clever in physics and chemistry; they knew nothing about the potential of the machines that were their own bodies. Nothing! So we continued to elude them and to study them . . ."

"How?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you that. If the Thinkers accept you, they'll inform you how it is done."

Joel stared at her narrow eyes. "But . . ."

"No. Don't interrupt. Your civilization, we learned, was a machine civilization. Your race even went so far as to reject any individual who differed from the norm. The Republic's goal was an ant-like similarity of all its members."

Joel said, "I don't see . . ."

"Don't you? What becomes of any mutation who escapes the vigilance of the Eugenics Board? What happened to you, Joel Haldykt?"

Joel was silent.

She looked at him searchingly. "Instead of concentrating on the physical sciences, my people have studied—themselves! The psychological sciences. We don't try to control our environment; we fit ourselves to it."

Joel shook his head, still not comprehending.

She said, "You humans build elaborate shelters to protect yourselves against the elements; we have developed our bodies to resist the weather. We revel in rain. Sunlight is intoxicating."

"You have added speed to your legs with machines, wings to your arms with machines. Your machines are like crutches. They give you an immense power, but they atrophy the natural endowments of your body. Could you do this?"

She pointed with a bird-like gesture behind Joe. He swung around. His eyes widened.

The bullhead had disappeared! He was staring straight through the ship as if it had ceased to exist. He could see the awesome black infinity of deep space speckled with countless pinpoint suns.

Then the bulkhead gathered substance. And he was looking at the blank wall again.

He let his breath escape. "How did you do that?"

"You were seeing with my eyes. Your people have invented machines to do that—the X-ray machine, the fluoroscope. They are crutches. They cannot do half so well as the eye alone!"

"But it's impossible!" he burst out.

She shook her head. "No. Consider the facts. Even in the densest solid, there is

more space than matter. Every atom is like a miniature solar system. There is an infinity of space in that bulkhead but only a drop of matter no bigger than a grain of sand. Is it not true?"

Joel nodded.

Tamis giggled. "You know that, and yet you let the grain of sand obstruct your view!"

"But why hide yourselves?" he burst out. "With powers like that . . ."

"I didn't destroy the wall," she interrupted. "I recognized its transparent qualities. That is all. We have no weapons, no science that can destroy. We can only hide!"

"But why hide?" he persisted.

She regarded him sadly. "Your people are a hard grasping race—ruthless. What has happened to the dominant life forms of Mars and Venus? They are extinct!"

"We don't propose to be driven into extinction. We have hidden ourselves, waiting for a weapon to free Asgard. And now the Republic itself has given us one!"

"The Republic has given you a weapon?"

"Yes. The maladjusted. The misfits. They are being organized. They are our weapon!"

"Very interesting!" drawled a low voice from the doorway to the fo'cs'le.

Tamis gave a startled gasp. Her face paled. Joel sprang to his feet.

Professor Gustav Liedl stood just inside the doorway. He held a small poisoned needle automatic trained unwaveringly at Joel's belly.

VI

IN THE TENSE SILENCE, LIEDL moved into the messroom.

"What are you going to do?" Joel demanded hoarsely.

Liedl grinned, his teeth glittering in the subdued night light.

"Spy!" said Tamis.

Liedl shrugged. "The word has a disagreeable sound. I prefer to call myself a Government Investigator."

He was edging past them toward the door to the guardroom. The muzzle of his gun hung to Joel's belly like the needle of a compass.

"Stop him, Joel!" Tamis begged wildly. "You are human. You can kill!"

Liedl had to pass within three feet of Joel down the narrow aisle between the tables in order to reach the guardroom. Joel could see the sweat standing out on his fallow forehead.

"Don't try anything!" the professor croaked and began to slide past.

There was the sound of a step from the fo'cs'le. Then the voice of Nick Thorp sang out softly, "Where are you going, Gus?"

Liedl blanched, jerked his head. For a second his eyes were off Joel.

Joel's hand whipped out, slapped the dart gun. It was torn from Liedl's fingers, went slithering across the deck to fetch up with a clatter against the bulkhead.

Liedl opened his mouth to yell. Joel's big hands closed about his throat.

"Kill him!" said Nick Thorp in a brittle voice.

Liedl clawed wildly, spasmodically, at Joel's wrists. The ex-professor's black goatee stuck straight out like a spear. His mouth was open. His round gray eyes bulged.

The muscles of Joel's forearms stood out like cords. Sweat trickled unheeded down his nose. His face was expressionless, his green eyes narrowed morosely.

The only sounds were Nick Thorp's hoarse breathing and the muted rumble of the jets. Tamis pressed herself against the bulkhead, a fixed, horrified expression on her face.

Liedl's convulsive thrashing grew weaker. Suddenly his knees buckled. He buckled. He slumped to the deck.

Joel followed him down, stooping over him bear-like, never relaxing the throttling pressure. Sweat ran into his eyes.

He became aware of Thorp shaking his shoulder.

"He's dead!" Thorp was saying. "Dead. Do you hear me?"

Joel drew a gasping breath, stood up, wiped the sweat out of his eyes. He didn't look at the crumpled figure on the deck. This was the second man he'd killed. The first had been an accident, but not Gustav Liedl.

Tamis said suddenly, "We can't leave him there!"

"No," Thorp agreed. "We'd better dump him down the waste chute. The recon-verters will dispose of him."

He picked up the body like a limp sack of potatoes. "Open the chute."

The girl held up the lid while Thorp slid the body into it. There was a faint swoosh. Tamis let the lid drop.

An awkward silence fell upon them.

"Well," Thorp broke it, "we're in this together. Liedl was a government spy. There'll be hell to pay when he turns up missing."

"But they can't trace it to us," Tamis asked. "Can they?"

"No. The reconverters will take care of that."

Joel stood up abruptly, started for the fo'cs'le.

"Joel!" Tamis said.

He didn't answer.

WALT ERISS, the ex-surgeon, returned eventually from the ship's hospital—a savage-eyed Eriiss who obviously had been nursing his grievances. Almost his first act was to confront Joel.

"Hakkyt," he said thinly, "that's twice you've struck me." He fingered his jaw, his curious yellow-gray eyes aflame. "I'll kill you for this."

Everyone stopped talking, stared breathlessly at the shaggy haired giant. Thorp moved beside Joel, but he didn't say anything.

Joel said dryly: "Well—what's stopping you?"

Walt Eriiss began to tremble. "No," he said in a harsh voice. "I don't want witnesses."

"Talk," said Joel. "You talk too much to do anything."

The ex-surgeon turned abruptly on his heel and stalked away.

Thorp said, low-voiced, "Watch him. Don't ever let him get behind you."

"He's a bluff."

"No. He's a killer. I've seen his kind before. He'll get you, Joel." The spaceman's blue eyes were cold. "You're not safe while he's alive . . ."

Joel frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean we'd better dump him down the reconverters tonight!"

Joel was shocked. "I'm not a murderer!"

"It's not murder; it's self-defense."

"No!" said Joel and refused to hear any more about it.

The succession of days crept past as

alike as beads on a string. Joel tried to draw Tamis out about the Ganelons, but she had been too badly frightened by Liedl's death.

She was afraid of him, too; he could see it in her eyes and it worried him. One sleeping period he asked her about it with characteristic bluntness.

Tamis bit her lip. "I—I never saw a man killed before. I can't get it out of my mind. It's not you, Joel." And then she began to tell him about her early life in the Ganelon village.

It was a life without sham—a simple joyous pagan existence close to the primal forces of nature. Tamis' voice trembled with nostalgia.

Joel was fascinated. He was on fire with impatience to reach Asgard.

On the forty-third day the *Zenith* came out of the Stellar Drive and began to fire her braking tubes.

Down, down she settled towards the surface of Asgard, second planet of Alpha Centauri A. An electric excitement ran like flames through the Unfit.

Joel couldn't eat. "How much longer?" he asked Thorp for the hundredth time.

"For Saturn's sake, sit down," the spaceman exploded.

Joel dropped into a relaxer, lit a cigarette. His green eyes glittered with anticipation. Tamis gave him an amused glance, but Joel sensed that the Ganelon girl was as excited as himself.

"We should be landing in an hour," she informed him.

Joel felt the *Zenith* shiver from the violence of her braking blasts. Minutes ticked past like hours. Then a bell began to ring and went on ringing.

After an interminable wait, Joel was shaken by a heavy jar. The *Zenith* rocked sickeningly. There was another blast of the jets. Another jar.

The roar dwindled and fell silent. A strange hush pervaded the ship.

"Asgard!" Thorp shouted, leaping to his feet and slapping Joel on the shoulder. "We're down!"

THE prisoners were led straight from the Star Ship into the spaceport where a robot surface bus was waiting to carry them into Eden. The bus was constructed after a design strange to Joel. It

was a half-track with heavy mesh screens at the windows.

When he accidentally touched the screen, he received a jarring electric shock. Tamis, who was seated beside him, giggled.

"Where do they think we'd escape to?" he demanded bitterly.

"They're not to keep us from escaping, Joel."

Just then the bus started smoothly, gathered momentum, hurt out into the brilliant light of Asgard's twin suns.

Joel forgot the electrified screens, craning his neck, trying to see everything at once. The spaceport, he realized, must be located at some distance from Eden. The road ran straight ahead—a glittering plastic ribbon cutting a channel through the fantastic jungle.

It was monstrous, that jungle. It writhed, twisted, swayed in great swaths although there wasn't the faintest breeze. Suddenly the bus stopped with a jerk to allow a herd of huge tree-like plants to swarm across the road.

Joel gaped at them in amazement. They had thick flesh-like trunks from which writhing tentacles sprouted like the arms of an octopus. A mass of wriggling squirming thread-like roots propelled the plants forward with startling speed.

"Ugh!" Joel shuddered, turned to Tamis. "What are those?"

"Nigel trees."

Joel wrenched back suddenly from the window. One of the nigel trees had lashed out with a tentacle. It touched the screen. There was a green spark. The tentacle jerked back.

"Now do you see why the screens are electrified?" Tamis asked. "The nigel trees are carnivorous."

The bus started to move again. Joel was regarding the Ganelon girl with a frown. "You actually live in the jungle with those things roaming about?"

"Yes. They don't bother us."

He looked incredulous. "Why not? Don't they like your flavor?"

Tamis giggled. "We can control them—a little. They don't think. They react to external stimuli."

"I see," said Joel. But he didn't.

He heard a wailing siren overhauling them fast from the direction of the spaceport. The bus pulled over to let an escort

of guards on armored prow-cycles roar past. Immediately following them, came a plastic tear-drop tri-wheeler. The governor and his daughter were lounging back in its roomy seats.

Priscilla glimpsed Joel and waved mockingly. Then the procession was gone, a second detachment of guards bringing up the rear.

Buildings, Joel noticed, had begun to replace the jungle, buildings of thick opaque plastic without windows. The moving sidewalks, shaded by gaudy awnings, were crowded with men and women clad in little more than shorts and sandals.

The air, Joel realized, was stifling. The dazzling yellow ball that was Alpha Centauri A rode high in the steel blue sky. Alpha Centauri B was a smaller molten-orange sun swimming just above the horizon. Joel had never felt such heat before. It was like the engine room of a tramp spaceship.

The bus slowed down, swung into the curb. Captain Goplerud shouted, "Pile out!"

Joel saw a detachment of guards drawn up at the curb. They wore white uniforms and pith helmets and carried small automatic paralyzers. A crowd began to collect behind the double line of guards, which ran like a gauntlet into a massive prison-like structure. From behind him, Nick Thorp said, "Here's an old friend of yours."

"Who?" He glanced up in surprise, recognized Priscilla Cameron grinning at him with an impish expression.

SHE was dressed in crisp white shorts and a brief jacket. Her green hair wasn't so startling as it had been aboard ship. Joel had noticed other women on the street of Eden with green hair, with yellow hair, with cerise, vermillion, chartreuse hair. It obviously was the latest mode of Asgard.

"That's the one, Colonel!" he heard Priscilla say to the man beside her. "Be sure to notify me when he comes up for sale."

Joel reddened.

The colonel touched his cap. "I'll be glad to, Miss Cameron." He turned to Captain Goplerud.

"Move them inside, Captain. They're

not used to the suns. Have a good crossing?"

"Rotten," said Goplerud. "I'm glad to get 'em off my hands. Watch that fellow Hakkyt, by the way. He's a killer."

Then the line began to move. He had been carried beyond earshot into the dim warmth of the prison.

VII

THE VOICE OF TAMIS RAVITZ came softly, insistently through the steaming prison twilight. "Joel. Joel!"

He swung away from the window through which he'd been staring at the streams of pedestrians outside. "Yes?"

The Ganelon girl lowered her voice. "I've been in communication with my people . . ."

"What?" Joel couldn't believe his ears. For two days the Unfit had been locked in the prison. All of them in a single barracks-like room. The girl hadn't been out of his sight. "How the devil . . ."

She smiled, tapped her forehead with a slim forefinger.

"Telepathy?"

She nodded.

Joel's green eyes narrowed. Tamis never failed to astonish him. The suffocating heat didn't bother her in the least.

The other prisoners were sprawled about the floor, many of them stark naked. Clothes of any kind were a torment. The slightest exertion brought fountains of sweat pouring from the skin. But Tamis wasn't even perspiring.

She said, "I've made my report. I've been given permission to tell you certain facts. Is there anything you particularly want to know?"

Joel scratched the bristles on his chin, frowned. "How is it," he asked finally, "that the Ganelons have never been discovered?"

An impish grin crossed her smooth elfin features. "Professor Liedl was almost right."

"Camouflage?"

"Yes. Mental camouflage. Is anyone watching?"

Joel glanced about swiftly. "No."

Tamis put her hand to her throat, unzipped the coveralls. With a sinuous movement, she freed her shoulders. The baggy

garment fell about her ankles. She stepped out of them—and disappeared.

Literally!

It took Joel a full moment for the realization to penetrate. He'd caught one arresting glimpse of Tamis, nude like a slim marble statue. Then she'd disappeared into the hot, fertile smelling air like a grain of sugar in a glass of water.

Suddenly he realized that he could still scent her. He became sharply aware of that alien, flower-like odor.

He heard her giggle, whirled around. She was standing not six feet off, regarding him with an amused expression.

"How did you do it?" Joel blurted out.

"It is difficult to explain. You have no words in your language to signify what I just did. I—I removed myself from your range of vision."

"Hell! I know that. But how?"

She tapped her forehead again. "It's done with an understanding of the nervous system."

Joel stared at her without any sign of comprehension.

"How can I make it clear?" she asked helplessly. "There are sounds you can't hear because they extend beyond the range of human ears. There are limits to your vision too. And I removed myself beyond those limits."

He said, "Oh," continuing to regard her fixedly. Then, "You could escape any time."

"Yes," she admitted. "But this is my job. I don't want to escape."

"What exactly is your job?" he demanded.

"Intelligence. There are many of us, both men and women disguised as humans who circulate among the Unfit."

"Then—?" Joel prompted.

"Then we make our reports to the Thinkers."

"You've mentioned these Thinkers before. Who are they?"

"Our scientists. Our wise men." She paused, changed the subject abruptly. "Today, Joel, we are to be sold."

"Damn!" He was appalled, remembering Priscilla Cameron's threat to buy him.

"Joel," she went on earnestly, "you are one of us now. The Thinkers have a job for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. Obviously Priscilla Cameron is interested in you, Joel. You must play up to her. It's the first chance we've had to get a spy close to Governor Cameron . . ."

"Hell, Tamis," he interrupted with an expression of distaste. "I can't do that!"

"But, Joel, you must! Not even my people have been able to get into the palace."

His green eyes quickened with interest. "Why not? They've been able to insinuate themselves everywhere else."

TAMIS shook her head. "We don't know! Dozens of Ganelons have slipped into Governor Cameron's palace. For a while we continue to receive their telepathic reports. Then nothing!"

He said: "Let me get this straight. The Ganelons have sent spies into the palace and all of them have simply vanished?"

She nodded.

"But who detected them, if they were invisible?"

"We don't know. Oh, Joel, that's why it's so important for you to obtain Priscilla Cameron's confidence. Women are—are indiscreet with their lovers."

Joel looked shocked.

"But Joel, she'll buy you anyway! You'll have the run of the palace. Slaves hear things and see things no one else can!"

She paused, saw him wavering, hurried on. "We're blind without someone close to the governor. The Thinkers are worried. They're holding off, afraid to give the word that'll start the revolt."

"How near is it?" he asked.

"We're ready to strike. The Unfit have stolen arms, built secret laboratories in the jungle. But we don't dare go ahead until we find out how much the governor knows. We may be blundering into a trap."

Joel drew a deep breath. "All right," he agreed reluctantly. "I'll try. How do I pass my information on—if I get any?"

She looked relieved. "The Thinkers will contact you."

A yell from outside their prison interrupted her. Somebody blew a whistle. A chorus of shouts, muffled by the thick walls, reached them faintly.

Joel swung toward the door. The prisoners were all staring in that direction too.

Nick Thorp scrambled to his feet, came over to Joel and Tamis. "What's the fuss?"

Tamis shrugged naked ivory shoulders.



She slipped into her coveralls, a frown tugging at her eyebrows.

Suddenly a siren turned loose like a blast from the last trumpet. Joel jumped involuntarily.

"Someone's escaped!" Tamis gasped.

The door burst open. Guards spilled into their prison. They wore white shorts and tunics and carried paralyzers. The dapper colonel was no longer jaunty. His face was red.

"Line up against the wall!" he shouted in a furious tone.

Joel fell into line beside Tamis and Thorp. The colonel opened the muster, barked, "Allyn!"

"Here."

"Aus!"

"Here."

"Baden!"

"Here."

Through the open door, Joel could see a white uniformed guard sprawled on the floor. Blood trickled from his mouth and nose and the doctor was fussing over him.

The colonel reached the D's. Then he said, "Eriis."

There was no answer.

"Eriss!" he repeated. The silence was explosive. No one breathed.

Joel craned his neck, looked up and down the line. The shaggy ex-surgeon was conspicuously absent!

The colonel swore. He turned on an under-officer at his elbow. "That's the man!" he said savagely. "Get his dossier and put his picture on the televisior immediately!"

The under-officer sprinted from the room, almost collided with a man entering the prison. Joel saw that it was the guard who'd been lying unconscious outside the door. His white uniform was blood-spattered and he was holding a handkerchief to his nose.

The colonel caught sight of him at the same time, asked in a cold voice, "What happened to you?"

The guard looked unhappy. "This fellow called me to the door. He asked to see you."

"See me?"

"Yes, sir. He said some of the prisoners were planning to escape. He wouldn't tell me about it. I was taking him to you . . ."

"Why did you let him out? Why didn't you send for me?" The colonel's voice was brittle as ice.

"He acted frightened, sir. Said they would kill him if he wasn't taken out."

"I see. Then he hit you. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir. As I was locking the door after him. I dropped the paralyzer. He snatched it and turned it on me. I don't remember anything else." The guard hesitated. "Did he get away, sir?"

"Yes. From the roof. Helicopter." The colonel turned on his heel, marched from the room. The guards withdrew.

Joel could hear the wailing screams of sirens rising all over the city.

"But where can he escape to?" Joel asked.

Tamis gave him a sober glance, lowered her voice. "There are half a dozen bands of escaped serfs in the jungle. My people have been protecting them. He may be able to join them—if the nigel trees don't get him first."

Thorp said, "Good riddance."

Joel didn't say anything. The ex-surgeon was a shrewd, brutal man. He didn't think the nigel trees would be able to catch him.

THE slave block was located in the principal square of Eden. Joel had been escorted thither along with the other prisoners, stripped and chained naked inside a long pavillion like the cattle sheds at a fair.

Streams of planters flowed through the pavillion, studying the prisoners, discussing their good and bad points before bidding on them. A good natured holiday air pervaded the throng. Alternately Joel was white-lipped with fury and red with embarrassment at their pointed observations.

All at once he stiffened, catching sight of Priscilla Cameron heading straight for him through the crowd.

Joel flushed darkly. He had never disliked anyone with the passion he felt for this girl with her defiant green hair, her slim cool arrogance.

Tamis Ravitz was chained in the stall next to Joel. The Ganelon girl leaned over and said, "Here she comes. Remember!"

"I see her. Who's the fellow with her?"

"General Roos. Fredrik Roos. He's head of the Asgardian Police."

Joel thought the police chief looked young and dashing in the white Asgardian uniform. A tiny jeweled paralyzer was belted about his waist.

There was a twinkle in Priscilla's green eyes when she paused in front of Joel's stall.

"Here he is, Freddy. Isn't he lovely?"

Joel stiffened.

"Lord," General Fredrik Roos drawled, "what a big brute!"

"Isn't he, though?"

Despite her light manner, Joel sensed a strain in Priscilla's voice. She was wearing a diminutive yellow jacket with puffed sleeves and a matching skirt. The shimmering microweb accentuated the firm youthful modeling of breast, hip and thigh.

"Did you ever see such shoulders?" he heard her ask Roos. "He's magnificent!" She turned back to Joel. "Flex your hips, Joel."

Their eyes locked. Joel didn't move, but an expression of surprise swept his features.

For a moment, Priscilla's guard had dropped. Fear was mirrored in her vivid green eyes. Fear and appeal. The girl was in a panic!

"Surly brute," Roos said.

"Oh, I'll tame him," she began gaily. Then she broke off, staring at Tamis Ravitz with a frozen startled expression.

Tamis was crouched against the wall in fright. Her small breasts rose and fell rapidly.

Priscilla wheeled suddenly, beckoned a guard. "That girl! Get her out of those chains and take her to the governor!"

The guard looked startled. He glanced at General Roos for confirmation.

Roos' face hardened. "Do what Miss Cameron says!"

The guard looked bewildered, but he hauled Tamis to her feet, unlocked the shackles. They fell to the floor with a clank.

Tamis straightened. Like the rest of the Unfit, she had been stripped of her baggy coveralls. She looked like a painting of Psyche by Boucher. She took one step . . .

"Keep hold of her wrist!" Priscilla cried.

But Tamis had vanished!

VIII

THE DELIVERY TRUCK RESEMBLED a dog catcher's wagon as it rolled up behind the governor's palace. It was Joel's first glimpse of Priscilla's home—a towering plastic structure in the style of the symbolists.

After the girl had bought him, guards had whisked him from the slave block. He'd been hauled through the streets like a wild beast.

Joel was led inside an office where the major-domo, a tall, tremendously fat man in a white slave tunic, signed the receipt for him. Alpha Centauri A had set. An angry orange light streamed through the windows from Alpha Centauri B.

The major-domo grunted, heaved himself to his feet. He was staring fixedly at Joel's arm.

Joel glanced down. The tattoo mark was fluorescing a vivid green!

"So!" said the major-domo.

Joel opened his mouth. The major-domo put his finger to his lips with a silencing gesture, covered the action with a yawn. But his eyes held a warning.

He slid his hand beneath his desk. Something clicked. The tattoo quit fluorescing.

"Put this on," he said going to a clothes locker and tossing Joel one of the white slave tunics. "Miss Cameron left orders that you weren't to be assigned until she sent for you."

Joel dropped the tunic over his head with a confused feeling.

"This way." The fat man led him into a corridor. As the door shut on the office, he stopped so abruptly that Joel bumped into him.

"All right," he said, "it's safe to talk here. But watch the mirrors. They're tele-visions! There isn't a room in the palace that isn't equipped with them. We're under constant surveillance."

Joel's brain was reeling. So the palace serfs were organized too!

"Listen close," the major-domo went on low voiced. "Meeting tonight. You'll be instructed in your part for the day."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the door at the opposite end of the corridor slid aside. The fat man jumped a foot, his face taking on the color of wet clay.

A girl brushed into the passage, stopped with a startled expression. She was young, Joel saw, and pretty with straight brown hair. Her short white tunic exposed long symmetrical legs.

"Hullo!" she said. "I was looking for you." Her brown eyes flicked a glance at Joel. "This the new man?"

The major-domo said, "Yes," in a relieved voice.

"Big devil. Does he bite?"

"He's a legitimate maladjustment case, if that's what you're driving at," the fat man replied stiffly. "What did you want?"

"Miss Cameron sent me to fetch him." She jerked her head at Joel.

The major-domo frowned. "You'll have to go," he said to Joel. "I was hoping she'd give you time to get your bearings. But that's not her way."

"Listen," said the girl turning anxiously to Joel. "I'm Peg—Miss Cameron's maid. You watch your step. That baggage has bought dozens of men off the Star Ships. They would be around for a week, ten days. Then pouf! Gone! Nobody would ever see 'em again!"

Joel looked startled. "What is she? A lady Bluebeard?"

"She's no lady," said the girl. "And it

Isn't funny. You watch your step. She can see in the dark like a cat!"

"What's that?" Joel's interest quickened. "See in the dark?"

"Like a cat?" Peg repeated. "And that's not the half of it. She can smell a person out like a bound! I mean actually. Just let her get one whiff of you and she knows who you are!"

Joel wasn't surprised. That explained how Priscilla had detected Tamis at the slave market. It also explained why the Ganelon spies had always been caught in the palace. Their alien scent had betrayed them to Priscilla's keen nostrils. Trapping them was easy.

"We've loitered here as long as we dare!" Peg said nervously. "I'll get in trouble."

The major-domo said, "Don't forget tonight," retreated down the passage to his office.

Joel followed the girl through a maze of corridors. Peg switched along, chattering incessantly. Once she hissed out of the corner of her mouth, "Talk! Don't gape at the mirrors. We're not supposed to know they're televisions!"

For the life of him, Joel couldn't think of anything to say. The mirrors were everywhere. They gave him a bad case of stage fright.

At the top floor, Peg paused before a door, pressed a stud. Joel saw that a panel of opaque plastic had been let into the face of the door.

"I'm on the terrace," said Priscilla's voice suddenly. It sounded so close that Joel's head snapped around. "Bring him back here."

And the door opened, silently, disclosing an empty vestibule. The walls were mirrors glowing with a subdued rose light. Their feet made no sound on the dull black plastic floor as they crossed the vestibule, entered the salon.

Like the vestibule, Joel saw, it was paneled in dimly gleaming mirrors. It made the room stretch out forever except where crystal doors gave onto a roof garden. He could see Priscilla Cameron stretched on a deck chair sunning herself in the luminous orange rays of Alpha Centauri B.

Peg pushed aside the crystal doors. "Here he is, Miss Cameron."

AT THEIR appearance, some creature set up an excited yap-yapping. Joel stared around trying to locate the beast. Then he swallowed. The yapping noise was issuing from a plant in a green tub!

"Thank you, Peg," Priscilla said. "That's all."

Peg curtsied, backed out.

"What is that thing?" Joel demanded.

"It's an Asgardian lung beast." Priscilla went to the excited plant, stroked it gently. The yapping ceased. "See. It's not a plant at all. It's one of the three known species of Asgardian rooted mammals."

Joel put his hand on the creature. It was like a lump of flesh covered with soft brown hair! He shuddered, snatched his hand away.

Priscilla laughed. She was wearing a short yellow smock and sandals. She said, "Sit down, Joel. I want to talk to you."

He sank into the relaxer she indicated. Instantly, flexible metal bands whipped about his throat, his biceps, his wrists and ankles. He wrenched convulsively, squirmed.

The more he fought the tighter the bands contracted. He couldn't breathe. A red haze swam before his eyes.

"Relax!" he heard Priscilla's voice coming from a great distance.

He slumped in the seat. The bands slackened off. He could breathe again.

"Damn you! Damn you!" he rasped. His throat was raw.

"I'm sorry, Joel!" she said in a scared voice. "I have to know something!"

Sitting stiffly in the chair's metal embrace, he watched her from the corner of his eye. She was wheeling a machine onto the terrace. Wires sprouted from it like the ganglia of the nervous system. Each wire terminated in a tiny saucer-shaped disk. She fastened them to his temple, the base of his skull, his solar plexus, his spine. Sweat burst out on Joel's face.

Priscilla finished attaching the sucker discs. Then she sat down at the machine, began to fiddle with a dial.

The machine went "*Glug—glug—bubble—glug—*"

"What the hell is that thing?" Joel demanded in a tight voice.

Priscilla didn't answer. The only sound was the "*glug—glug—bubble—glug—*" of the machine. Then it said, "*What the hell*"

is she up to?" in an alarmed metallic voice.

Joel jerked as if he'd been slapped.

The machine said, "*Not Not!*" And then it became absolutely unintelligible. It babbled.

Joel stared at it in consternation.

It said: "*My Lord, it's reading my thoughts!*"

He turned horrified eyes to Priscilla.

The machine rattled on inexorably: "*Why? Why? What does she want to know? Ganelons. Don't think . . . Tamis. Where's Tamis? And Thorp. Wonder—, I'm being verbose. Go around in circles. Circles. Curves. Good legs and—, A hell of a thing to be thinking of now! What happened to those other men? Lady Bluebeard. She's no lady. She sure as hell isn't . . .*"

"For Pete's sake shut that thing off!"

Joel and the machine roared in unison.

Priscilla lifted her eyes, asked, "Have the rebels contacted you?"

"No," said Joel.

The machine said: "*That damned machine will give me away.*"

"So they have contacted you?"

"Yes," he replied bitterly.

The machine said: "*What's the use of lying?*"

Priscilla threw back her head and laughed. "Joel, are you in communication with the Ganelons?"

"Ganelons?" he said, "What are they?"

The machine said: "*How did she know that? Ye gods, she'll pull everything out of me. Make my mind a blank. Don't think about Tamis. Don't. . .*"

"Who's Tamis?" Priscilla asked.

"*She's forgotten,*" the machine said in surprise. "*No. She didn't know the girl's name; just that she was a Ganelon. Wow, what a horrible, uncontrollable thing a person's mind is. Multiplication tables. Two times two is four. . . Damn! I can't remember the multiplication tables!*"

"Joel," said Priscilla, "I'm going to make you my bodyguard."

"Bodyguard!" echoed Joel and the machine together. "Hell fire. . ." He shut his mouth. The machine went, "*Glug—glug—bubble—glug. 'Out damned spot! Out, I say! One: Two: Why, then 'tis time to do't . . .*"

"What's that?" Priscilla demanded suspiciously.

"Macbeth," Joel replied with a grin. And for ten minutes she had to listen to the machine spouting quotations from Shakespeare. After that it started on nursery rhymes, began a dissertation on cattle breeding.

"All right!" said Priscilla savagely. "You win. I can stand anything but hearing about the love life of a cow!" She shut the machine off.

Joel slumped weakly in the seat. Sweat was rolling down his face.

PRISCILLA was pensive as she removed the suckers, rolled the machine away. When she returned she was carrying a small paralyzer.

"Did you mean it," Joel asked, "when you said I'm to be your bodyguard?"

"Yes."

"But that's absurd!"

"Would you stand by and watch me murdered?"

"No," he admitted.

"Fair enough," she said. "That's all I ask."

She threw a switch on the back of the chair. The bands loosened. Joel stood up, rubbing his throat.

Priscilla shot him an oblique glance, said dryly, "Don't misunderstand me. I need protection. Nothing else."

Turning abruptly she entered the apartment, beckoned for him to follow. She touched a hidden plate in the floor with her toe. Joel saw a section of the mirror paneled wall slide aside revealing a shallow passage beyond.

"This is where you're to stay. So that you can watch the apartment at all times."

Joel entered the passage, gave a low whistle of surprise. It ran all around the salon behind the mirrors. He could see the room through them as if they were the clearest plate glass.

Security glass, he realized. It had been bombarded with chromium so that from one side it acted as a mirror. But from the other it was transparent.

"Who built this?"

"The last governor. He was terrified of assassination. The palace is a rat-run of secret passages and lifts, concealed televisions, electronic eyes and alarms."

Joel said, "Priscilla, why did you buy me?"

The twinkle returned to her green eyes. "You'll learn. Meanwhile you'd better familiarize yourself with these passages." And she shut the panel on him.

Joel spent the next week exploring the labyrinthine passages that ran everywhere from the sub basement to the top floor. He emerged only to eat or when Priscilla called him over the wrist radio.

From the serfs he heard echoes of what was taking place in the outside world. Walt Eriss, he learned from Peg, had joined one of the outlaw bands. He was being talked about constantly among the serfs.

A man of action, they called the ex-surgeon, brutal, ruthless, shrewd. A strong man, Joel held his own counsel. But the reports worried him.

He was exploring between the walls on the ninth level when he came to one of the trick mirrors and peered through. A long magnificent corridor met his eye. Directly across from the mirror was a lift.

General Fredrik Roos had his quarters on this level, Joel knew, but the hall was empty. He was about to turn away when the indicator light on the elevator glowed faintly.

Someone was coming up.

The car stopped, the doors slid back. Joel frowned. There wasn't a soul in the cage.

Then the doors shut and the cage dropped from sight.

Joel bit his lip. All at once, the indicator lit up again. The car was ascending to the ninth floor once more.

Again the doors slid aside. But this time General Fredrik Roos stepped briskly from the cage, turned left down the corridor.

The chief of the Asgardian police had taken only half a dozen steps, though, when he halted. Joel could see his nostrils twitch. Then his hand darted to the jeweled paralyzer at his waist. It was like a man practicing a quick draw—shadow boxing.

Roos pointed the paralyzer at emptiness, pressed the stud. A dazzling yellow beam lanced down the corridor, winked off.

Joel sucked in his breath. The misty outline of a body was materializing on the floor just ahead of Roos!

There had been someone there—someone who'd been invisible until the ray knocked him out!

"Ganelon!" Joel thought. He could see the shape of bare ivory legs and a delicate waist. It was a girl lying huddled on the floor!

Roos had snatched up a heavy vase from a niche in the wall. He was striding toward the unconscious Ganelon girl.

The ray only paralyzed; it didn't kill. Roos was going to murder the spy, Joel realized. At that instant he recognized her.

It was Tamis Ravitz!

IX

JOEL'S REACTION was instinctive. He pressed the mechanism that actuated the mirror, drew his paralyzer. The yellow beam flicked down the corridor, touched Roos's spine.

The general went limp as a microwave stocking!

Joel was at the girl's side with a bound. He scooped her up, plunged back into the passage behind the mirrors. He never glanced at Roos. The police chief, he knew, would be unconscious for an hour or more from the effects of the ray.

Joel hurried between the walls with the limp Ganelon girl in his arms. When he reached his own room he stretched her on his bunk.

Joel's room was only a niche in the wall between Priscilla Cameron's bedroom and the salon. It was just big enough for a bunk, a stool and a desk. One-way mirrors sealed it off from the apartment.

A glance assured Joel that Priscilla wasn't in. He began to chaff Tamis' limbs.

The minutes dragged past. Joel saw the color return to her cheeks. She looked like a slim, adolescent Aphrodite.

The girl opened her eyes, stared up at him blankly. "Joel! I—I did find you!" Then her features froze with horror. "But Roos! He knew I was there! He—he saw me. The ray..."

"You're safe," said Joel. "I knocked him out with a paralyzer."

"But how did he discover me?"

"That's what's troubling me. Unless..." He paused, stared thoughtfully at the frightened Ganelon girl. "Priscilla Cameron is a mutant. Her sense of smell is as keen as mine. That's how your spies have been detected. Maybe Roos is a mutant also."

Tamis sat up, glimpsed Priscilla's luxurious bedrooms through the mirrors, caught her lip between her teeth.

"Joel! Where are we?"

"Priscilla Cameron's apartment." He explained about the mirrors.

Tamis sighed in relief. "Joel, what have you learned? The Unfit are impatient. That ex-surgeon, Walt Eriss, you remember him? He's insisting that we attack at once. He—he's insane Joel!"

"He's a homicidal maniac," Joel agreed dryly. "I wish I'd taken Thorp's advice and dumped him down the reconverters." He shook his head. "I haven't learned much; but it's all bad!" And he told her about Priscilla's knowledge of the slave organization.

"They can't know!" Tamis' voice was tight with horror. "They can't, Joel! After all our precautions. What are they going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Hasn't Priscilla Cameron confided in you? I thought..."

He laughed shortly. "I might as well be a piece of furniture."

"You mean she hasn't..."

"That's exactly what I do mean. I'm her bodyguard. She gave me to understand the first day that our association was to be strictly business." He made a wry grimace. "And that's what it has been!"

"But why—" Tamis looked utterly dumfounded. "She acted like a wanton aboard ship."

"It was just an act. Don't ask me why. I don't know."

"Where is she now?"

"In conference with her father."

Tamis rose shakily. "I don't understand it, Joel. There are wheels within wheels. I must get back to the Thinkers."

Joel guided her through the walls to a tiny lift barely large enough to hold them both. They dropped swiftly to the basement, traversed a long tunnel.

"This comes out in an alley beyond the gates," Joel informed her. "Have you heard anything of Nick Thorp?"

"He escaped," Tamis said. "He's staying in my village."

"Thorp?"

"Yes. He joined the outlaws first. But he had trouble with Walt Eriss. Eriss had him thrown into a herd of nigel trees."

"Good Lord," said Joel. "How did he get away?"

Tamis began to grow red. "I—I was watching out for him."

"Sort of a Guardian Angel?"

She giggled. "You could call it that."

There was a scanner at the end of the tunnel. Joel put his eye to it. "The alley's deserted. You can go now." He touched a button, the wall slid aside. The brilliant light of Asgard's twin suns flooded the entrance. He began, "When will you—" and stopped.

Tamis was gone.

WHEN Joel returned to his cell, Priscilla Cameron was sitting on the edge of his bunk, tapping a sandaled toe on the floor. "You've had a visitor!" she greeted him.

Joel concealed his astonishment. Priscilla was wearing her green hair in a roll about her face. Crisp white shorts and halter made a sharp contrast against the warm sepia of her skin.

He said, "That's preposterous..."

But Priscilla stopped him with a laugh. "She left her scent all over the place. It was that Gandelon girl, wasn't it? Never mind lying; I know!"

Joel grinned crookedly. "Well?"

"Are you in love with her, Joel?"

"Love?" He looked puzzled. The word was archaic. The Eugenic Board's policy of controlled scientific breeding had pretty well obliterated that particular passion. Desire remained, but it was physical. "Oh," he said finally, "you mean the emotion that all the old poets used to rave about. That's atavistic, isn't it?"

"But we're atavisms," she said.

Joel stared at Priscilla, conscious of that strange affinity binding them together. He could feel the pulse ticking in his throat. He took a step towards her, stopped, furious with himself.

"What about those other men you bought?" he demanded hoarsely; "the ones who disappeared?"

Priscilla's green eyes were alight. "Why, Joel, you're jealous!"

"What happened to them?" he repeated.

She said: "You're going to find out now. That's why I came for you," and sprang to her feet. "Hurry. We mustn't keep them waiting any longer."

"What the devil are you talking about?" Joel demanded suspiciously. "Keep who waiting?"

"You'll see," she laughed.

Priscilla led him straight to the governor's suite. The guard at the entrance saluted smartly, stood aside.

The governor's aide, a young, pink-checked cadet, was sitting behind a bank of televisions. He sprang to his feet, clicked his heels. "They're in the conference room," he said to Priscilla.

She nodded, shoved Joel down a corridor at the left. A panel opened automatically at their approach. Joel paused on the threshold startled.

The conference room was long, low-ceilinged and devoid of windows. Perhaps twenty people were sitting at a long table with Governor Cameron at the head. Fredrik Roos, Chief of the Asgardian Police, was on the governor's right.

"Sit down, Hakkyt," Cameron said and indicated a vacant chair.

Wordlessly, Joel sank into the relaxer. Priscilla pulled up a chair beside him. She clutched his hand beneath the table, squeezed it reassuringly.

"You're a mutant," the governor began abruptly. "Don't be alarmed. We're all mutations here."

Joel's jaw didn't actually drop but he felt that it had. "Mutants!" he managed to say. "All of you?"

"Precisely."

"But you're the Governor of Asgard!"

Priscilla laughed excitedly. "Let me introduce him, father. Joel, you've met General Roos. He's commander-in-chief of Asgard's police."

The lean handsome General inclined his head. There was a glitter in his gray eyes.

Joel felt suddenly cold, thought, "He knows that it was I who rayed him with the paralyzer."

Priscilla was proceeding around the table, reciting off names and titles. There were too many for Joel to remember. But one thing stood out. They were all from the Executive Class. The Chief Administrator of Eden, of Nelsville, of Nuvenice. The port officials, the security officers...

They were all there—and all mutants!

"Hakkyt," said the governor softly, "you're skeptical, but understand this. The human race has progressed from the level

of apes through its mutations. Not startling ones. But millions upon millions of minor unnoticeable variations!

"When the Eugenics Board first began its experiments in controlled breeding its policy was more liberal. It recognized the value of mutations and tried to incorporate the best variations into the race."

"Gradually though, they grew more rigid. When the present type homo sapiens was produced about a thousand years ago, they quit experimenting altogether."

The governor brought his fist down with a bang on the table.

"Hakkyt," he said in a rising voice, "evolution isn't static! If a species doesn't progress, it degenerates! The human race is on the point of extinction!"

"Have you ever noticed how an apple tree will bear a humber crop just before it dies? It's the tree's blind effort to reseed itself. What do you think has brought on the present wave of mutations, of socially maladjusted individuals?"

Joel stared at him fascinated.

"I'll tell you!" the governor answered himself. "The policy of the Eugenics Board has dammed the course of human evolution! The race is dying. But before it dies, nature is making one last attempt to perpetuate the species!"

"We're the only hope of mankind."

"You—" he stabbed a forefinger at Joel's chest—"and I and the rest of the mutations here on Asgard!"

JOEL'S brain was reeling. Governor Cameron's words had the ring of truth.

"But how did you get control of Asgard? Does the Republic know?"

It was General Roos who answered in his lazy drawl. Joel turned his head to stare at him.

"No," said Roos. "The Republic is unaware that mutants hold all the administrative posts in the colony."

"But how..."

"Briefly, Hakkyt, the mutants on Terra saw that if they didn't unite, they were doomed. Societies were formed. The mutants were taught to disguise their oddities, submerge themselves in the race."

"But the psycho-detectors," Joel protested. "They couldn't fool the machines!"

"No. But Asgard was different. Asgard is a frontier. It's four and a third light

years from the Republic. The laws are not enforced so strictly."

The implications were too startling for Joel to grasp all at once. These were mutants, and he was one of them. They were his kind whether he liked it or not.

Roos was saying, "The mutants migrated—secretly. Some of them rose to minor administrative posts. And when a mutant was placed in authority, he bent every effort to install others of his class."

"We're trying to give the human race a new lease on life—a new beginning!" Priscilla broke in passionately. "This—this is a sanctuary where people won't be persecuted because they're different."

"Slavery..." Joel began.

"It's not slavery," the governor interrupted. "We petitioned the Republic to send us the Unfit in order to rescue them from the Experimental Stations."

"Ordinarily, Hakkyt, you would have been separated immediately from the maladjusted and the criminally insane of the labor battalion. True mutants are rare, and Priscilla usually buys them..."

"Priscilla buys them?" Joel caught the flash of amusement in the girl's green eyes.

"Yes," said the governor. "We've encouraged the rumor that she is—ah—headstrong in order to divert suspicion. Actually the mutants are brought to the palace where they can be taught to disguise themselves, given a new identity, put in posts of authority."

"That is what should have happened to you. Except your report from the Eugenics Board disappeared!"

"Priscilla, though, insisted that you were a true mutant. We didn't, however, feel that we could take a chance. Not when we're in the midst of a crisis..."

"Crisis?" Joel's eyes swept the circle of faces. Their expressions had changed subtly. They were intent, nervous. He felt a coldness creep up his spine. "What has happened?"

"Nothing—yet!" General Roos drawled.

A woman with claret hair said, "It's what is about to happen!"

"The Republic?" Joel hazarded.

Governor Cameron shook his head. "We're not afraid of the Republic. They're four and a third light years off. They haven't the Star Ships necessary to trans-

port and maintain an army across such a vast distance."

Joel's green eyes narrowed. "Then what are you afraid of?"

"The Ganelons!" Governor Cameron gave Joel a shrewd glance. "We know that you've been in contact with the natives. Frankly, Hakkyt, that's why you're here!" "But I don't see..."

General Roos smiled grimly. "Oh, we're not afraid of the Ganelons themselves. But they've organized an underground movement to overthrow the government. That's us!"

Priscilla took Joel's hand, gripped it convulsively. "That wouldn't be so bad, Joel, even though we stand to lose everything. But they've organized the maladjusted, the criminally insane! The worst elements among the unfit!"

"But can't you put down a revolt?"

General Roos laughed savagely. "I've a handful of police with paralyzers. Paralyzers, mind you! Don't you understand? There hasn't been a war in a thousand years! There are no weapons! No factories to make them. No officers with even the most rudimentary knowledge of tactics."

"But the Unfit haven't weapons either..."

"That's where you're mistaken! Our spies have reported a ray type projector that destroys the red blood corpuscles! They've been manufacturing them in hidden laboratories in the jungle!"

Silence fell over the conference table—a breathless anxious silence. Joel could feel their eyes on him and he shifted uncomfortably.

"But what do you expect me to do?" he asked defensively.

Governor Cameron stared at Joel with his penetrating green eyes. "Hakkyt, we want to treat with the Ganelons. There's room for both our races. You're in communication with their Thinkers. You're our only contact with them."

Joel said suspiciously, "If you were anxious to treat with the Thinkers, why did you murder their spies?"

"Murder their spies?" Priscilla echoed. Half a dozen voices burst out in protest.

Joel stared pointedly at General Fredrik Roos. The dark, handsome general smiled, shrugged.

"But no one's killed any Ganelons!" the

governor said. "You're mistaken, Hakkyt." Fredrik Roos said, "I'm afraid he's quite right."

"What?" said the governor.

"This is no time for sentimentality," Roos went on dryly. "Too much is at stake. Several Ganelons have been trapped in the palace by my officers. They have some trick of invisibility. Psychological, I believe. But we could still scent them. We knocked them out with paralyzers. Since they are telepathic, it wouldn't silence them to lock them up. I ordered them destroyed."

Governor Cameron's face blackened. "Why..." he began.

A shout interrupted him. There was a chorus of startled exclamations. Joel glanced over his shoulder.

The governor's aide had just burst into the conference room. A terrified expression convulsed his pink face.

"Governor!" he yelled. "They've risen! They're attacking Eden!"

"Who?" the Governor half rose from his chair. "Get a grip on yourself! Who, man?"

"The Unfit!"

X

JOEL WAS STUNNED. The silence held a moment longer, then everyone began to shout at once.

Roos leaped to his feet. "The control hall, Governor! Join me there as soon as you can!" Before the last words were out of his mouth, he was sprinting through the door.

Governor Cameron succeeded in catching the attention of the Nuvenice and Nelsville officials, ordered them back to their posts to organize the free planters. As the last of them trooped from the room, he swung on Joel. "Well, Hakkyt, which side are you on?"

It was a decision that Joel had known for some time he must make. The realization of what it would mean to have men like Walt Eriss, the ex-surgeon, in power tipped the scales. He said, "I'm with you, I suppose, Governor." And felt like a traitor to Tamis and Nick Thorp and the rest.

"Then for Heaven's sake, contact the Thinkers. Tell them we'll arbitrate!"

"But I can't!"

"What?"

"You should have let me know about this sooner. I don't know how to contact the Thinkers."

Governor Cameron stared at him with blazing green eyes. Then he swung abruptly on his heel, tramped from the room.

A rumble of sound like the mutter of surf vibrated against the soles of Joel's feet. He felt Priscilla tug at his sleeve.

"The control room," she was saying. "Hurry!"

Pandemonium burst on Joel's ears as they entered the control hall. The uproar of battle was emanating from banks of televisions. They were being operated by a score of young officers—General Roos' staff. The general himself strode back and forth in front of the screens.

Scenes of the bitter house-to-house fighting, the stampeding mobs of civilians flashed across the screens with terrifying reality. Joel was appalled. He felt his throat tighten, his heart hammer against his ribs.

A young field officer appeared briefly in one of the screens. "*We can't hold them, sir,*" he panted. "*It's those damn rays!*"

"Fall back to L Street," Roos ordered. "We're making a stand along the monorail."

"Look!" Priscilla said, clutching Joel's arm and pointing at another screen.

It mirrored a broad empty street down which rays were probing like searching fingers. They were pale green, scarcely visible in the blinding light of Asgard's twin suns.

Serfs in white ketons were carrying the deadly projectors at their hips. There was a Ganelon with them, Joel saw. One lone naked man walking in their midst.

"There's a Ganelon with every squad!" Roos said at Joel's elbow. "They're directing the attack."

Just then Governor Cameron stood up. He'd been in communication with Nuvenice. "They can't spare any troops." His voice was stricken. "The serfs have risen there, too."

Roos began to curse.

Joel felt numb. The Unfit, he realized, were being led by a master strategist. The slave rebellions at Nelsville and Nuvenice had been instigated in order that troops

could not be diverted to Eden against which the main assault was being directed.

A voice from one of the audios blared suddenly. "*Spaceport calling. The rebels are...*" A faint hissing noise burst from the instrument.

At that instant every screen in the television bank flickered and went dead!

Joel's ears rang with the silence. It was like the dead spot following an explosion.

Roos turned a blanched face toward them. "They've cut the power!"

In the unnatural silence, Joel could hear that muttering roar again. It was louder. He could even distinguish shouts and screams.

A guard burst suddenly into the disorganized control hall. His features were pale as chalk. "Slaves! he gasped unsteadily. "Palace slaves—fighting! Ray projectors!"

He sank on a bench. Joel stared at him in horror. The guard was slipping sideways. Then he rolled to the floor. He was dead.

"The ray!" Priscilla said in a faint voice. "It destroys the red blood corpuscles!"

Joel clenched his fist. "If I could reach any of those Ganelons with the Unfit, I could establish contact with the Thinkers. They're telepathic!"

"But can you get out of the palace?" Roos demanded.

Joel said, "Yes." He was surprised that Roos didn't seem to know about the secret passages.

The chief of the Asgardian police unpinned the gold and azure shield, the insignia of his office. "Take this. It'll get you through our lines." He made a wry grimace. "I've been at fault about the Ganelons. I hope it doesn't queer your mission."

It had cost Roos an effort to make that admission, Joel realized. He said, "I feel as if I were deserting..."

"Nonsense, man," the governor interrupted. "You're the one who's taking the risk. We can barricade ourselves in these rooms. We're safer here than anywhere else on Asgard."

Priscilla took Joel's face between her cool palms, kissed him passionately. "I—I love you, Joel. Please take care of yourself."

Joel was startled. Then his arms closed about her hungrily.

The governor cleared his throat. "There's a proper time and place for everything."

Joel tore himself away. "I'll be back," he said. "And to hell with what's proper!"

TERRA Parkway was jammed with refugees streaming toward the palace. To the south, Joel could see a black pall of smoke overhanging the streets.

A worried frown creased his forehead. He had slipped from the palace by the tunnel along which he had escorted Tamis earlier. He should be devoting his whole attention to his immediate danger. But he couldn't dismiss the green-haired Priscilla Cameron from his thoughts.

He was worried about her there in the palace. Was this love? It was a disturbing sensation.

He began to breast the flood of refugees streaming from the battle area. White faces taut with fear. The faces of children and women. It was like a nightmare.

After a while the faces began to thin out. And then there weren't any left at all. The street lay empty before him.

"Hey!" a voice called. "Where do you think you're going?"

Joel caught sight of a guard crouched in a doorway.

"Get in here!" the guard growled. "What d'you want to do? Get killed? The rebels are up ahead."

Joel slid into the doorway. The smoke clouds were spreading. Alpha Centauri A was a blood red ball just above the house tops.

"What's happening?" Joel demanded. The strange quiet felt unnatural.

The guard said, "Our officers are having a talk with the rebels?"

"Talk? What for?"

"We're tired of being rayed down. And nothing but paralyzers to fight back with. We're going over to the rebels. Hey! Come back here!"

But Joel was gone, running down the empty street.

Other men shouted at him from doorways, from windows. Suddenly an officer jumped in his path, raised a paralyzer.

"Hold up there!"

Joel skidded to a halt. If the troops

were deserting to the Unfit, General Roos' badge would be of no help to him now.

"Where—", the officer began.

Joel hit him in the temple with a sledgehammer fist. He didn't wait to see the effect of his blow, but darted into an open doorway.

There was an entrance hall and it was crowded with men. Joel put his head down, charged straight through them.

He hit the steps four at a time, Yellow flame lapped at his heels. Then he was around a curve. A whistle blew someplace below, shrill, threatening. He leaped up two more flights of steps, came out on the roof.

More guards were lying on their bellies behind a coping. They stared at him curiously.

"Ray that damn fool down!" a voice roared from the street.

Joel plunged straight for the recumbent soldiers. They clawed at their paralyzers, trying to twist around.

He leaped to the coping, hung there a second silhouetted against the murky sky. Then he jumped spasmodically for the adjoining roof.

He didn't look at the ground three stories below, but he was aware of it. His feet struck the edge of the next roof and he sprawled forward, gasping for breath.

Two roofs in front of him, he could see a row of shaggy heads raised above another coping. They were watching him curiously.

Then they began to yell and beckon, lifting projectors into sight. Pale green fingers probed all around him, but none of the deadly blood-destroying rays touched him.

They were covering his retreat, Joel realized. He scrambled to his feet. He leaped the next gap easily and the next.

The grinning serfs pulled him down behind the wall, clapping him on the back. Joel was too winded to talk.

One of the rebels was crawling across the roof towards him. He had a blackarm-band. Something dangled from his belt—like hair. It was hair! Long black woman's hair—and it was bloody!

Joel bit his lip, feeling sick at his stomach. He remembered suddenly what Priscilla had said, "The Ganelon's have organized the worst elements among the Unfit—the criminally insane!"

The man reached him, said, "Who are you?"

"I'm from the palace," said Joel. He was careful not to look at the scalp. "I've news!"

"Palace!" echoed the serf. "Has it fallen?"

"No, Quick, man, where's a Ganelon. I have to make my report."

The rebel gave Joel a sharp suspicious glance. Then he lowered his eyes. "There's one below stairs. Come on." He began to crawl across the roof, hitching his projector after him. Joel followed on hands and knees.

A stairwell gaped ahead. As soon as the walls shielded them, the serf stood up. "Hurry it up," he growled. "I'm in charge. I'm not supposed to leave the roof."

Joel rose.

"You go first," said the serf. "You may be all right, but I don't want you breathing down the back of my neck."

Joel started down the steps in the lead. He heard a whisper. Then the roof caved in!

Something seemed to burst inside his skull. He pitched forward, rolled down the stair, brought up in a limp unconscious heap at the foot.

Above him, the serf frowned at the shattered barrel of his projector. "Must have a skull like a meteor shield," he muttered. He threw the projector over the railing.

JOEL opened his eyes. Pain wrenched at his skull. There was noise and dust.

At first he thought he was back on Terra in the cattle sheds. Then the scene jarred into focus. He remembered the serf with the woman's scalp at his belt.

He was lying on the ground, he realized, in the midst of a hideous tangle of shouting men and half-tracks. Dust sifted into his nostrils. The furious orange rays of Alpha Centauri B cast an ominous glow over the endless line of vehicles moving into the gutted city.

He sat up. It was a clearing in the jungle. It must have covered hundreds of acres. Prisoners were being held in berds like cattle. Loot was stacked everywhere.

Someone prodded him roughly with a toe, said, "Get up!"

Joel scrambled to his feet, stood there weaving. His hands were manacled. His head felt as if it must burst.

Then he drew in his breath sharply.

Just behind him stood a yellow tree and beneath it a deal table with the shaggy figure of Walt Eriss bending over it!

The ex-surgeon was talking over a portable television. A dozen men surrounded the giant. They were wearing scarlet arm-bands.

Joel could hear Eriss saying, "Yes, we're pushing on the palace now. No, I'm using runners." He clicked off the set, looked up, staring coldly at Joel.

"Where are the Ganelons?" he demanded in a harsh voice.

Joel's eyes widened. There wasn't a Ganelon in sight. Then he caught their alien unhuman scent. They were all around, invisible to the mind's eye! What did it mean?

A thrill of alarm rippled up his spine. He shrugged, said, "How would I know?"

"You're one of their spies," stated Eriss flatly. "I want to know what they're up to!"

"But I thought they were leading the attack on Eden."

"The Ganelons?" Eriss' voice was sarcastic. "They're a pack of old women. I directed the attack. I'm in charge."

"But I saw them..."

Eriss leaned forward, said savagely, "They were my eyes and ears. They telepathed my orders! But they tried to stop the killing. When I refused to listen to them they deserted." He began to beat the table with his fist. "I want to know what they're up to!"

All the time Joel was conscious of the Ganelons' scent. He could feel their eyes on him. He said, "Then you've broken with them?"

"What are they trying to do?" Eriss repeated, purple faced.

Joel's green eyes narrowed. The ex-surgeon was afraid of the Ganelons, he realized suddenly. Eriss was concentrating his attack on Eden, his rear unprotected. For all he knew a Ganelon army might be massing silently in the jungle. Millions upon millions of the natives...

Joel had to reach the Thinkers! He could sense the invisible natives all about him. He said in desperate ringing tones,

"I'm Joel Hakkyt. I've a message for the Thinkers. Please relay this to the thinkers. I'm Joel Hakkyt. I've a message..."

Eriss looked startled, roared, "What are you talking about?"

Sweat burst from Joel's face. He expected to be rayed down any moment. He said, "Tamis was my contact. I have information—vital information." He could scent the Ganelons closing in. Eriss was staring at him with flaming yellow-gray eyes.

"What sort of information?" he demanded.

Joel said, "Mutants are in control of all government posts. True mutants. They are fighting for the same things that the Ganelons are. Freedom!"

"You've organized the worst elements among us, the unbalanced, the criminally insane. You've helped them to devise weapons, given them unlimited power. They'll turn on you in the end, ferret you out..."

A frown was gathering on Walt Eriss' forehead. He glanced a question at his lieutenants. They shrugged.

Joel saw that they were about to catch on. He said quickly, "Governor Cameron and a party of mutants have barricaded themselves in the palace. They want to arbitrate. Relay message. This is Joel Hakkyt. Contact Tamis. She will verify..."

"By George!" roared Eriss. "He's communicating with the Ganelons!"

He leaped to his feet, sending the deal table over with a crash, struck Joel in the mouth. "Take him off and ray him!"

The blow knocked Joel sprawling. He scrambled to his feet, his head ringing. Two men seized him by the arms. But Eriss wheeled back.

"Wait," said the ex-surgeon. He gave Joel a shrewd look. "Any more information?"

Joel stared at him with hot furious eyes. He didn't say anything.

Eriss laughed harshly. "So that was all. You've finished your spiel, eh? You're harmless." He turned to the men who were holding Joel's arms. "I've changed my mind. Take him into the jungle and stake him out for the Nigel trees. There's a herd of 'em in the neighborhood."

And he burst into laughter.

THE heat in that forest of fetid grotesqueries was like the atmosphere of an orchid house. Joel was bathed in sweat as the serfs manacled him to a tree trunk.

He could tell by their actions that they were frightened. They kept their voices down, glanced nervously over their shoulders. The minute they finished, they crashed away through the thick underbrush toward the distant sounds of Walt Eriss' headquarters.

Joel's nerves were taut as fiddle strings. He didn't know whether his message had gotten through to the Thinkers. He could feel small snaky tendrils pluck at his tunic, brush against his bare legs.

There was a rustling noise behind him. He lunged in panic. The manacles cut into his wrists, bloodied them. He was like a goat staked out to bait a tiger. A sinuous vine wrapped itself about his waist, tightened.

It was like the coil of a boa constrictor, thick as his thigh, tough as cable. It wrenched him against his manacles until he thought his arms were going to be torn out at the sockets.

He squirmed helplessly. Then he caught sight of the plant that had snared him—the thick flesh-colored trunk, the crown of writhing tentacles. It exuded the odor of carbolic acid. The pool of digestive acid glistened deep within its maw.

Nigel tree! He was caught by a carnivorous nigel tree!

Then, unexpectedly Joel felt the tentacles relax. He leaned gasping, choking against the trunk of the tree to which he was manacled. He was dazed from shock.

A voice said, "You're safe now, my son."

Joel shuddered, looked over his shoulder. A naked white-haired Ganelon was standing scarcely a yard off. He stooped and fumbled with Joel's manacles. They fell to the ground with a clank.

Joel's knees began to buckle. He threw his arms about the trunk.

"We came as quickly as we could," the Ganelon said in a kindly voice.

Joel asked, "You—you relayed my message to the Thinkers?"

"We are the Thinkers, my son. We were there." As he spoke, more of the creatures materialized. It was completely unnerving as if they were popping from another dimension.

They were a handsome, sprightly race. There wasn't a stick of clothing or an ornament in the crowd. Then Joel saw a familiar figure emerge from the undergrowth.

"Thorp!" he cried. "Nick Thorp!"

The battered amiable ex-spaceman came forward, hand outstretched. "Not so loud, lad. We're too close to Eriss' headquarters."

The uproar from the rebels' camp was muted by the dense jungle, but it was still audible. Joel asked, "Have you seen Tamis?"

"Look around, lad!"

Joel heard a giggle, spun about. Tamis was standing at his elbow, laughing at him. Then she quit laughing. Her elfin features sobered. "Joel," she said, "we didn't know about the mutants."

"Why did the Ganelons withdraw from the attack?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

"It was horrible," she said. "We—we unleashed a force we couldn't control. It's beyond description, the scenes of rapine and carriage that are being enacted in Eden. The police have gone over to the rebels . . ."

"The palace?" Joel interrupted harshly.

"What has happened to the palace?"

"The palace has fallen."

Joel felt the blood drain from his face. He said, "Then what is Walt Eriss doing in the jungle?"

"He doesn't know, yet. His men are mopping up. Many of the free planters have barricaded themselves in their houses."

Joel clenched his fists. He stared at the circle of kindly troubled faces.

"The Unfit must be wiped out!" His voice trembled with suppressed fury. "Don't you know what it will mean to have homicidal maniacs, the mentally unbalanced, in power?"

The Ganelons gave him a pitying look. "My son," interposed the old man who'd freed him, "as you say, they should be exterminated. They are like the nigel trees—senseless brutes with an instinct to kill."

"Then why don't you stop them?"

"We can't."

"You can't!" said Joel. The words were like a blow to his solar plexus. "You can't..."

"We are not a numerous people," the

old Ganelon explained softly. "Moreover we have a repugnance towards killing that amounts to a psychological block..."

"But you started the attack!"

"No. It was someone else who ordered the attack, someone else who planned the strategy. We went along to try to stop the bloodshed. But it was useless. We had less control over them than we have over the nigel trees."

Joel's eyes widened. He stared at the old Ganelon's saddened mien. There could be no doubt but that he was telling the truth.

"Who?" Joel breathed.

The naked Ganelon shook his head. "We don't know. He's like a puppeteer hiding behind the scene. And Walt Eriss is only one of his puppets!"

XI

THE UTTER ALIENNESS OF the jungle suddenly impressed itself on Joel. The creeping crawling plants. The shouts from Eriss' headquarters, the rumble of vehicles sounded startlingly close.

Through the interstices in the foliage he caught a glimpse of something moving. His eyes widened. Then he saw that it was the herd of nigel trees and he shuddered.

He frowned. "Nigel trees!"

"Yes," Tamis nodded. "But they won't bother us."

"You can control them!" Joel said thoughtfully. "Could you direct them to attack?"

"Attack?" The elder Ganelon looked puzzled. "I don't know. We could arouse their appetite, lead them to the rebels." He narrowed his pupilless eyes. "Attack..."

Joel was like a drowning man clutching at a straw. "The ray couldn't harm the plants. It destroys red blood corpuscles. They'd be invincible!"

Thorpe suddenly smacked a fist into his palm. "By Neptune!" he said, "it's worth a try. How do you control the brutes? Telepathy?"

Tamis nodded. "They're mindless; that is, they react to external stimuli. We create the illusion that generates the desired response. It is as easy to influence a herd as a single tree."

"A conditioned reflex," said another.

The old man said, "But to attack a city with plants—even cannibal plants..." He shook his head.

"But there would be thousands of them."

Joel's voice trembled in excitement. "Each Ganelon could control a herd. They'd pour down the streets, create a panic..." He paused. "If you're doubtful, why not tackle Walt Eriss' headquarters first?"

The old Ganelon looked startled.

Joel said, "There's a herd of the trees here now. Try it. Drive them into the rebels' camp!"

"But there are only fifty or so trees in the herd; We'd have to call others..."

"Call them! Call them now."

The old Ganelon bowed his head. Moments slid by. With a sense of terror Joel was conscious of their passing. What had become of Priscilla? Who was the mysterious man behind the uprising of the Unfit. Why didn't the Thinkers act?

"Do something!" Joel burst out savagely. "Don't just stand there! Do something!"

The elder Ganelon smiled. "Patience, my son. The trees are being called."

Alpha Centauri B hung just above the treetops, casting long orange rays across the rebels' camp. Joel and Thorpe and Tamis lay side by side in the shrubbery at the edge of the clearing.

The endless procession of cars still rolled into Eden down the muddied highway. Another line of cars returned, bringing exhausted men, wounded men, loot and prisoners.

"Where are the trees?" Joel asked.

Tamis said, "Shhh."

Joel heard a crackling of branches behind him, stiffened. Then he caught sight of a moving trunk. More and more of them appeared, blending with the jungle until they were scarcely discernable.

They smelled like carboic acid! It was the weirdest march he'd ever witnessed, the massed shuddering movement of herd after herd of the carnivorous nigel trees. The balls of thread-like roots at their bases squirmed like Medusa's heads, thrusting the ungainly plants forward.

A wave of trees broke suddenly from the opposite wall of the jungle. For a moment they went unnoticed. Then someone shouted.

More trees squirmed into the clearing, green fronds asway. It looked as if the

jungle itself were creeping back over the cleared ground.

Pandemonium broke loose. The two lines of cars ground to a halt. Pale green rays sprang at the nigel trees, bathed them futilely. The trees inexorably tightened the circle.

A man was snatched up by a tentacle. He kicked, screamed. More men were caught by the ravenous plants. The stench of carbolic acid stung Joel's nostrils.

The rebels broke and ran. But there was no place to run to. They saw only a second wavering wall of greenery, of thrashing tentacles!

Joel was white, sick at his stomach. He caught sight of Walt Eriss. The shaggy giant was sprinting for a half-track. He almost made it. Then a tentacle girdled his ankle.

The ex-surgeon was lifted head downward into the air, squirming, shrieking. Then he vanished into the gaping maw of the plant.

All at once, one of the Ganelons stepped out from the midst of the trees.

"Surrender!" he yelled, "Surrender, and we'll call off the plants."

HE had to repeat his offer a dozen times before he could catch the attention of the frantic serfs. Then one of the rebels threw his projector to the ground, raised his hands. Another and another followed suit. It was over.

Joel felt dazed.

Tamis touched his shoulder. "The Thinkers are expressing their thanks."

Thorp said, "You're on the air. You're a celebrity," and grinned.

But Joel didn't smile. "What about Eden?" he asked.

Tamis said, "The Thinkers are calling the neighboring tribes. There will be a big round-up of nigel trees..."

Joel let his breath escape with relief. "Tamis," he said, "can the Thinkers give me a guide to the palace? I've got to get back."

"Is it Priscilla Cameron, Joel?"

He looked at the Ganelon girl. She had tight hold of Nick Thorp's hand.

"Yes," Joel replied. "Lord knows what might have happened to her."

"We'll guide you."

"We're both with you," Thorp added.

Joel felt suddenly grateful to the strangely assorted pair. He'd had to come all the way to Asgard to rediscover the meaning of friendship. Like love, he thought.

Alpha Centauri B had set and Alpha Centauri A had not yet risen when they arrived at the outskirts of Eden. The sky over the city was lurid from the reflection of burning buildings. Whole blocks must be afire.

"There's Proxima Centauri," Tamis said, pointing to a drop of blood gleaming in the night sky. "The little yellowish star above it is Sol."

Joel stared at it with a lump in his throat. It looked very cold and far away. He hunched his shoulders, started down the street towards the twinkling lights of Palace Hill.

The city itself was dark, lit only by ruddy flames. Gangs of looters prowled the streets carrying torches. They paid no attention to Joel and Thorp and the elfin Ganelon girl.

At the entrance to the tunnel beneath the palace, Joel halted. "Tamis, it isn't safe for you to come any farther. You either, Nick."

But Tamis said, "I'll step out of sight," and did so. Thorp growled, "You'll need me. Maybe Priscilla's alive."

Joel said, "Maybe," and touched the switch. A section of the wall slid aside revealing the black tunnel mouth.

Thorp whistled softly.

"The walls of the palace are bollow," Joel explained. He closed the door behind them.

At the first floor, he stopped the lift, crept out to one of the mirrors. An immense hall met his eyes. It overflowed with guards armed with ray projectors. The mutter of their voices was a low rumble in Joel's ears.

"But can't they see us?" Thorp hissed.

"No," Joel explained the mirrors.

"Priscilla's not there," Thorp said. "How are you going to find her?"

"I'll find her," said Joel grimly and for the next hour he prowled through the walls of the first floor like some ancestral ghost. Serfs and police were everywhere. In some of the rooms indescribable orgies were taking place.

"It'll take a year to search this maze," Thorp growled.

Joel stopped, wiped the sweat out of his eyes. Glancing through the customary mirror, he saw a narrow passage down which a man was walking.

"Hold it!" he said. He waited until the serf was passing the mirror, touched the switch. The panel slid aside. The serf jerked his head around. Joel hit him in the temple with his clubbed fist.

The rebel smashed into the wall across the corridor. Before he could fall, Joel grabbed him by the collar, hauled him into the passage. The panel clicked shut.

"Jupiter!" Thorp breathed. "Did you kill him?"

"No. He's just stunned." Joel slapped the man's face, shook him.

The rebel opened his eyes, stared at Joel groggily. Then he let out a yell, tried to heave himself to his feet.

Joel shoved him back to the floor. "Yell your head off. Nobody can hear you."

The man stopped yelling. "What's the idea?" he demanded.

"Who's in charge here?"

"The Emperor."

"The Emperor?" Joel felt a tingle of excitement. "Who's he?"

"He's the Emperor. That's all I know. I never saw him before today."

Joel shook his fist under the fellow's nose.

"So help me!" the man said in a scared voice, "that's all I know!"

"Where is this Emperor?"

"He's in his rooms on the top floor."

"What have they done with the governor and his daughter, the chief of police?"

"Don't hit me. I don't know. It's the gospel truth."

Joel said savagely, "Tie him up."

Thorp tore up the serf's tunic, bound his wrists and ankles, tied them together so that he arched backward like a bow.

"Don't forget me," the serf pleaded. "I'll rot here in the walls."

But Joel was gone.

SURBUDED indirect lighting illuminated the top floor. Joel paused behind a mirror with Thorp at his elbow. He glanced into Governor Cameron's suite. The rooms were gutted, empty.

He said, "There's only one other apartment up here. That's Priscilla's. He must be there."

"Emperor!" Disgust was heavy in Thorp's voice. "What does he think this is, the pre-Atomic age?"

Joel didn't reply. He was conscious of Tamis' alien scent as he threaded his way between the walls. He could see guards lounging before Priscilla's door.

"That's where he is!" he said savagely. He was trembling, he realized. He drew his paralyzer.

But when he reached the salon, it was empty. He ran through the passage to Priscilla's bedroom, halted, icy fingers squeezing his heart.

Through the one-way mirrors, he could see Priscilla sitting in a relaxer. There was a frightened, defiant expression on her face. And she was staring up at Fredrik Roos.

The lean saturnine chief of the Asgardian police was bending over the green haired girl, saying furiously, "After what I've done, do you think I'd hesitate to kill you?"

Priscilla shivered.

Behind Joel, Thorp said, "The Emperor, Fredrik I of Asgard. He's going to have the shortest reign in history!"

"Shut up!" said Joel. "He's talking."

Roos said, "I don't need the mutants; they need me! Look what happened to Eden. Nelsville and Nuvenice will fall the same way. But you can save thousands of lives if you persuade them to cooperate."

Joel said, "I'm going to take him," and touched the switch.

The panel made a faint squeak as it slid back. Joel leveled the paralyzer, touched the stud.

Roos jerked around, his eyes widening. Then he leaped aside spasmodically. The yellow flame splashed harmlessly against the opposite wall.

Before Joel could catch the police chief in his sights again, the room was plunged into darkness. Priscilla screamed.

"Stay back, Thorp!" Joel yelled. "He can see in the dark!"

Something snatched his paralyzer. He struck out blindly, felt his fist crunch against flesh and bone. The paralyzer clattered on the floor.

Joel's eyes were adjusting. He could make out a dim gray silhouette dancing in front of him. He struck at it. The shadow bobbed. Joel's fist whistled through air.

He struck again and missed. Then a barrage of fists exploded in his face. He was driven back against the wall.

He could see the elusive Roos more clearly, a weaving, bobbing silhouette. He swung and missed, swung and missed.

Roos hit him in the mouth, in the solar plexus.

Joel sagged gasping to his knees. Roos kicked him viciously in the kidneys. It was like the searing thrust of a knife.

He thought, I'm being licked. Once he'd seen a Histrofilm of a prizefight. That was why he couldn't hit the police chief. Roos was a skilled boxer.

He pulled himself groggily to his feet, lunged for him. He could see him quite clearly now but in varying shades of gray like a black and white photograph.

Roos danced aside, clipped him behind the ear. He was grinning. "Ox!" he said.

Joel felt like a bear attacked by a slashing pack of wolves. He shook his head, shuffled after Roos cautiously. He took three hard punches in the face without faltering, kept closing in.

Roos backed up. Joel crowded him in the corner, letting the police chief hit him with everything he had.

At the last moment Roos guessed Joel's purpose. He tried to duck and slide clear.

Joel grabbed him by the collar and belt. With a grunt, he heaved him over his head.

The police chief kicked, squirmed frantically. The muscles in Joel's shoulders cracked. But he, held him aloft, began to walk deliberately toward the crystal doors leading to the terrace.

Roos cursed, wrenched, flailing wildly with arms and legs. Joel kicked the doors aside.

Alpha Centauri A was flooding the terrace with a clear dawn light.

Roos began to beg for his life.

Joel's face was a grimace of triumph. He reached the parapet, heaved the pseudo-Emperor over the edge.

A single piercing scream came up to him.

JOEL didn't look down. He gripped the railing, staring out over the gutted city. He heard a step behind him, felt Priscilla cover his hand with hers.

"I knew you'd come. But Joel, we mustn't waste time!" Her voice was tremulous. "Please hurry before the alarm is given!"

"No," he said. "We'll wait here."

"Joel! Roos' death won't stop the revolt. There'll be a dozen men to take his place. Maybe the Ganelons will take us in!"

"Look," he said simply, and pointed out over the parapet.

In perplexity the girl glanced down on the city spread out below. Then she gave a little scream, clapped her hand over her mouth.

Slowly, inexorably, the encircling jungle was enveloping the city! Already the outlying districts were submerged beneath a wave of thrashing greenery.

Joel saw a band of ant-like men trying to stem the advance of the Nigel trees with ray projectors. Then they broke and ran.

Someone began to pound on the door to Priscilla's suite and shout for the Emperor. Then he went away.

Thorp called, "What is it, Joel?"

"The plants! They're attacking!"

With a shout, the ex-spaceman rushed to the parapet, dragging Tamis with him.

The Ganelon girl's ivory cheeks were flushed and she held tight to Thorp's hand as she leaned over the parapet.

Priscilla's green eyes widened. "The Ganelons! They've set the Nigel trees onto the rebels."

Joel nodded.

"Oh, Joel! Then you did get through to the Thinkers!" She threw her arms around his neck. Suddenly she drew back. "But are we safe here?"

Tamis said, "My people are directing the trees. We're safe. So are your father and the other captives."

Priscilla let herself go limp in Joel's arms, nestled her head on his shoulder.

Beneath them the sea of vegetation flooded down the streets, swarmed over the buildings.

"The new Eden," said Joel. He glanced down into Priscilla's upturned face. What he saw there set his pulse racing. He had come a long way, he realized, from the dissatisfied specialist in animal husbandry.

He had come a long way, but it was only the beginning.

When Kohonnes Screamed

By GARDNER F. FOX



And, as he came, Randolph was destroying the towers of changel

Kohonnes breathed out across his little world and made the waters back up and the stones crawl and the trees writhe abominably. Why couldn't he distort men's souls also?

THE SPACESHIP WAS CHANG-
ing shape all around him. The
curving walls sloped inward at crazy
angles, and the glassine windows bulged
like giant bubbles. The floor was an un-
ending series of little waves, and the
ceiling melted to drop liquid pellets.

"This is it!" exulted Grim Thorrsen,
slamming the levers of his control board,
striving to slip his ship into the tug of the
little planet looming through the starboard
window. "Whatever kidnapped our trading
vessels, whatever happened to the Fleet
cruisers sent after them—here it is."

His tawny hair, long uncut, looped over
his hard blue eyes as he stared at the in-
struments in front of him. Even the hard
steelscite cones and rods were altering
subtly, their shapes fading to reform in
different, twisted patterns. Grim felt a
quick stab of fear. Sudden pain changed
his grin to a spasmodic grimace of agony.

"Pirates I don't mind," he gasped, his
body jerking suddenly as the force that
bent his spaceship reached inside his body.
"I—I'd take on Black Randolph as quick
as down a cup of *yossalot* right now. But
this thing—"

His head whipped back as spasms tore his chest. Laboring, sweat standing out on his high forehead, he thought, 'Matter isn't matter here—not as I know it. A ceiling starts crying steel tears and a heatlite floor develops a permanent.'

The force was tearing him apart with pain. It came like iron fingers in his belly and across his ribs. It bent him over so that his face went purple.

No wonder the Trader Unions lost their big Caravans, packed to their rivets as they were with priceless radium and korse-210 from Tanit and the other planets of the suns Deneb and Achernar! The Council thought at first that it was Black Randolph looting, so the Unions Council ordered out the cruisers from the Interstellar Fleet to hunt him down. The cruisers, like the big Caravans, never came back.

Then they sent for Grim Thorssen.

The big Viking throwback was the spot trouble-tripper of the Fleet. He'd been decorated—and paid in credits—from Antares to Kruger-60 for a brash bravery that ran close to the margins of foolhardiness. But what looked like recklessness in some men was planned daring with the blond Nordic. He could think faster and shoot straighter than any other three men in the Fleet. He had the highest I.Q. that the books provided for, and black spots on his chest from friendly duels with his fellow officers using black disintegrator charges. He was smart and he was crazy and his brother Commanders loved him. They said to each other, "If anybody can do it, Grim will. He'll find out what grabs the Caravans and the cruisers."

Well, now he knew. Tortured and strained, bent in a thousand positions in a matter of minutes, he was sobbing out the thought that he wished he hadn't. There wasn't anything you could do to a force that turned your ship into a fantastic nightmare and cut you in two with lancets of agony.

The planet loomed in the forward window. A faint light hazed its outlines, as though a private sun of its own shone beyond it. Grim hit his lip until it bled, fighting the nausea and the throbbing in him. He had to land his ship. He had to find out what the force was, and what it wanted. He had to fight the tough luck that had bounded the Trader Unions ever

since old Jasper Jones had retired. He had to—

The spacer grated on a ledge of rocks, its keel cracking and folding back and ripping off on the underside of the hull. A gigantic thin needle rising from a boulder towered before him. Grim yanked back on the power-brakes, but it was no use.

The blunt rock cliff loomed up. The nose of his vessel went ploughing into it with a force that snapped his leather safeties and skyrocketed him into the forward port . . .

THERE was a sun! Grim felt it beating hot into his closed eyes. Muscles ached and pain pounded through his big frame. His eyes came open to what was left of his ruined Corsair.

There was only one half that was recognizable. That was the front section accorndioned against the black cliffside. The back section was queerly warped and sculpted into a caricature of a gaunt, metallic tree. Grim shook his head dazedly and lifted his eyes.

The landscape was riotous, mad. Things that looked like trees and bushes lifted branches bent and swollen attached to trunks that looped in bulbous curves. Tiny animals with seven horns and eight legs loped past. A gigantic beast with the hairy head of a mastodon, but with three long trunks, stared at him over the top of a blue bush; trumpeted, and was gone. And high above, a great yellow orb blazed heat and light.

Grim pulled himself up onto a gnarled rock. He squinted upward under a shading hand. He grunted, "Looks synthetic. Something about it—"

Leather rasped on rock, above him. Grim whirled, right hand going for the over-nut handles of his disintegrator.

A girl stood on a ledge above him. Both hands were raised to the mass of rich black hair tumbling about her cape-hung shoulders. She was almost as tall as Grim, her long legs encased in tight golden skirts, her midriff bare below an ornate bolero that hugged her breasts. Seeing him, she brought her arms down fast, slant dark eyes widening.

Grim chuckled. "If I thought you could understand me, I'd ask you what kind of a crazy place this is."

The girl went back two steps, still staring at him. Her brow wrinkled. She said, "I do not understand you. Please—go away! If you are one of Althaya's men—"

Grim stared in amazement. He had spoken in the space *patois* that was used by the Fleet and the Caravan crews from Mars on outward. But the girl had spoken to him in the pure, almost archaic mother tongue! He had to stop and recall the idioms and phraseology that men still used on Tellura. Grim, like most others of his breed, had never been on the Earth. They were born and bred among the stars and there they usually died.

"What is your name?" he said haltingly, remembering lessons in the Fleet school. "What is this place? And what in the name of Hades makes all—this?"

He waved his hand at the distorted trees, at the little animals, at the oddly humped ground. The girl did not look at his gesturing hand. Her slot eyes were fastened to his face; in fright, he thought.

She whispered, "Where is Althaya? Where is the Red Priestess?"

Grim said gently, "Look, honey. I'm a stranger here myself. You're the first normal looking thing I've come across—and even you are several shades above average." He let his eyes drift over her, and she straightened angrily.

"I am the Black Priestess of Kohonnes. I am Tlokine."

"Okay, okay. Don't get sore. Come on down and let's be friends."

Something in his amused blue eyes decided her. She let a smile turn up the corners of her wide red mouth and came down gracefully.

"That's better," Grim chuckled. "Tell me all about this place."

"This is Stormland. The god Kohonnes made it by sending out his breath and creating it. And when he is angry he sends his breath again—and his world reshapes itself nearer to his heart's desire."

Grim stared at her oddly. "You cribbed that from Omar. Shows you do know something about the Earth. And the sun? And Kohonnes, what is he?"

"Kohonnes is the creator of Stormland. He made me and Althaya and her people. He made the sun, too. His breath goes out and reshapes everything. If you want to avoid the anger of Kohonnes, you stand

within the red markers. He never harms anyone in there."

Grim looked where her finger pointed. On the lower edges of the rock cliff he could see bright crimson splashes as though paint had been slapped on the stone. The red band formed a huge oval. He saw the tall needles lifting from the cliff. It was not rock as he had thought before the crash. It was a metal spire ending in a globe of interlaced wires and metal ribbons.

"Looks like an energy broadcaster," he muttered. Then he turned toward the girl. "Where can I see this Kohonnes of yours? What's he like?"

"He is All. He guides his people and shows them the way to a better, easier life. But some of his people do not want to wait—they want to be as powerful as Kohonnes before they are ready. And Althaya—the Red One—she is worse than any of them. Even now she is in special favor with the All. She knows somehow *before* the breath-storms come. She can walk freely across Stormland. I and others like me must run between the markers, for we are never sure when the god may breathe again."

Grim felt he was in the middle of a surrealistic nightmare. He wondered if he were dead, still crumpled up in his wrecked spacer. Or better, dreaming. He looked at the obscenely humped ground, and shook his head.

"Honey, you have a plenty mixed-up man on your hands. If I could see this Kohonnes, talk with him—"

Tlokine smiled and nodded. "I will take you to him. I feel sure he will be glad to see you."

"I hope," whispered Grim under his breath.

* * * * *

It was gloomy in the black-walled Temple. The girl with the red hair fanning down across her naked back shuddered. She could never quite overcome that stab of superstitious fear—

"I am displeased, Althaya. I had counted on better things from you."

"Your will is the Law, Kohonnes."

"See to it, then."

The girl bowed low until her crimson

hair fell down over her head to the basalt floor. She seemed subservient, but there was a ruthless smile on her hidden lips.

* * * * *

Grim Thorssen found this world a land of magic. Twice now, in his journey to the god Kobonnes, he had sought refuge within the red ovals with Tlokine. He had seen shapes rear up from loamy ground, assume fey forms and dissolve, as a sea-wave rises and breaks against a cliff. Trees enchanted themselves before him; became tall, towering rods of wood; became thin, twisting things crawling along the grasses. It was like watching a world in its birthing pangs. It was beautiful and eerie and frightening, all at once.

"They used to tell tales of magicians to me when I was a boy," he said to Tlokine. "I feel as though I'd been transplanted right into one of those stories."

"It is Kobonnes' breath," answered the girl, putting a hand on his shoulder to get to her feet. "But hurry now. We must go fast. Althaya may be riding with her men in this region."

They went fast and lightly. They ate of red fruit hanging from round branches, and drank from silvery brooks gurgling among dark rocks.

On the morning of the fourth day, they heard hoofbeats growing into a thundering tattoo behind them. Tlokine and Grim turned and looked at the same instant.

A lovely girl with red hair waving in the breeze rode a big white stallion at the head of ten men clad in leather armor, with needle-like longswords dangling at their waists. Their horses' hooves pounded them up to the man and girl waiting tensely on the ground.

The redhead reined in her horse, laughed mockingly down at the black-haired Tlokine. She cried, "I warned you, black one. I told you Kobonnes favored me."

Grim saw despair on Tlokine's face, and fright beneath it. Althaya whispered, "Now I will give you back to the Breath... on one of my own altars!"

The redhead looked past Tlokine; saw Grim, and stared. Her puzzled green eyes raked him from the soles of his space-boots to his thick, tawny hair. Grim saw her eyes fill with curiosity over the gold and black Fleet uniform, over the stars-

and-bars emblazoned in gilt thread on his chest and sleeve.

"Who are you?" she asked suddenly.

"Grim Thorssen. Commander in the Interstellar Fleet."

She shook her head. She said, "I don't know what to do with you. Perhaps Ran—" Althaya paused and looked frightened. Biting her full lower lip, she looked quickly around her. Then she waved a hand at Tlokine and Grim, saying to her men, "Take them."

Grim would have fought, but the odds were too great. He shrugged his shoulders philosophically and let his wrists be bound. Then he swung up behind one of the men-at-arms on the broad croup of his horse.

THE SUN drew golden glints from the smooth dun walls of the tiny castle on the black rocks. All around the base of the cliff was splashed the red color that denoted a zone of safety from the change and the storm that swept the countryside around it. The little cavalcade pounded across the wooden drawbridge that extended across the little red-splashed gully and into the dark cobbled-stoned courtyard beyond.

Althaya looked at Grim as he slipped from behind the saddle. She said, "Come with me, man." Obediently he followed her beneath a broad archway, along a cool corridor and into a small room.

She turned and walked up close to him. Her deep brown eyes were disturbing under the long red lashes. She saw his perturbation and smiled. She said, "You like Althaya?"

Grim chuckled, "Any man would like you, gorgeous. But why the buildup? You're too pretty to need a sop for your vanity."

She looked around her, came even closer so that Grim was assailed by her perfume and smooth white arms. She said, "There is a man living in my castle, a man called Black Randolph—ah, you know him?"

"He is a pirate. I've followed him for eight years and never caught up with him."

She looked at him oddly. "He was wrecked on Stormland. I rescued him from the storm. He stays here, seeking the secret of what causes the Change to come across my world. With it he says he can go out

into his own land and be a king. He wants me to help him."

"And?"

Althaya shuddered. "I am afraid of him. He is hard. Ruthless. I have watched you. You can be a hard man, too. If you and I were to learn the secret of the Force—instead of Black Randolph—"

The Viking throwback laughed. "What you mean to say, beautiful, is that you think I'd be easier to manage than Black Randolph—once we got to be kings."

She slapped him hard across the face, and her face writhed in passion. She whispered, "For that you'll go to my torture knives, you *parasit*!"

Grim laughed, "Don't play it so thick, Red. A woman only gets as mad as that when a man turoes her down because she isn't intriguing enough—not because he won't go spacebad with her."

Althaya laughed harshly. Her green eyes approved him. Her bare shoulders lifted casually.

Grim said, "But while we're on the subject, what is the force that makes the change?"

"Kohonnes does it. He is the god of all this world."

"Is he a man? A beast? What?"

She shook her red head. "Kohonnes is made of metal. He has a thousand eyes that glow. He—"

"A machine," mused Grim. "But what kind of a machine does what this one will? And—who operates it?"

"Kohonnes. I do not know what a machine is, but Kohonnes is the All. He—"

Grim laughed, "How do you intend to steal a god?"

Althaya looked troubled. She said, "Black Randolph will know...and that reminds me. He will want to see you."

BLACK RANDOLPH went hysterical when he saw Grim. He threw back his head and roared. He slapped his hand against his thigh, making a sharp, flat sound. Tears of mirth sprang from his deep-sunk eyes.

He came across the tiled floor of the room to stand spraddle-legged before Grim, hands slammed into lean hips. His thin lips twitched amusedly.

"So you found me at last, Thorssen!

You've come to the end of your eight-year trail. Congratulations! Too bad you aren't going back to Unions Council. You could tell 'em you're the only Fleet man ever to meet Black Randolph face to face."

Fury and hate seethed in the man's face. He brought his hard palm flat against Grim's cheek. "For eight years you've hounded me, Thorssen. You never caught me, but you smashed my empire. One by one—from Antares to Betelgeuse—you got my best men. But you'll suffer for it. Oh Lord, how you'll suffer!"

Black Randolph's eyes flickered when they brought Tlokine in. He grinned at her, running his eyes over her lissome body. He chuckled, "Too bad she has to go on your altar, Red. I could use that myself."

Althaya went white. She whispered sibilantly, "My patience is strained already. See that you don't test it further."

The pirate laughed, slid an arm around her waist and drew her against him. He laughed, "Once we get that force in our hands, Red—I'll make you a goddess as I promised. What about that, Thorssen? Imagine Black Randolph with that force all his own—free to roam between the stars, in the spacelanes—dictate my own terms to Unions Council or smash their ships! It was my lucky day when I spacewrecked on this planet."

Grim laughed coldly, "You can't kidnap a god, you scum."

"A god! Bah! I've lived here long enough to learn things. Haven't you wondered where all these people came from? Why they speak archaic English? Look at this!"

His hand on Althaya's shoulder slid the short jacket down to bare a tattoo mark on her white flesh. He grinned as she angrily shrugged the jacket into place. "Medical cases. Amnesiac spaceshock. Memories gone. Speech centers sound. Body normal. Perfect specimens to populate a new planet."

"Who brought 'em here, Thorssen? Not a god!"

The pirate laughed huskily. "Althaya and I—we're making them into our people. People to attack Kohonnes and get his secret. It's really too bad for you. You might join us instead of spending a week on her altar under the best torture-knives

she owns. You'll be begging for death before the first day is over. And there'll be seven more of 'em, Thorsen—a day of agony for each of the years you've hounded me. Eight years, eight days."

Althaya clapped her hands. Big men, naked to their waists that were covered with twisted loin-clothes, padded in on bare soles. Althaya said, "Take them to the cells. Tomorrow at dawn, bring them to Kobonnes' altar. We will make a sacrifice to the All."

THE rising sun was tinting the flat onyx altar with red stains when they put Grim on it. His ankles and his wrists were lashed so tightly that the skin was puffy and swollen around the cording. Staring upward, the Viking throwback saw an outcropping lip of blackish basalt hanging like a seawave caught in stone right above him. A weirdly bent tree dropped wire-like branches toward him, from which hung triangular red leaves.

Beneath the altar, and all around this rostrum of stone, was a scarlet marker. By craning his head beyond Althaya and Randolph, who stood rubbing his hands together and gloating, Grim could see the crimson band.

"I hope your voice is in good shape, Thorsen," chuckled the pirate. "I want to hear you yell loud and long. I've waited a long time for this!"

Althaya clapped her hands abruptly, and a big man with a broken nose flat against his face and tiny eyes that glittered cruelly stepped forward. A thin knife, curved and barbed, was in his right hand. The redhead said, "They are bringing Tlokine now. When she is here—commence, Tagat."

They crowded around the altar, waiting. Grim could see the tense, excited faces. Randolph craned forward, a muscle in his cheek dancing with eagerness. Althaya licked at her crimson mouth with her tongue. And beyond them, among the leather-jerkined men-at-arms, Tlokine stared with horrified eyes from her pale white face.

Tagat grinned and brought the knife down. Almost tenderly he placed the razor-like edge to Grim's naked ribs. He looked slyly up at Althaya.

Randolph cried boarsely, "Hurry up!

Waiting is as much torture to me as that knife is going to be to him."

Althaya said dryly, "Begin, Tagat."

The knife moved—

"Wait!"

Althaya stood rigid, looking down at Grim. He saw her green eyes widen dreamily. She whispered, "Kobonnes is sending his breath out across the world. Soon now the Change will come."

"So what?" rasped big Randolph, hands working furiously, his fingers opening and closing. "We're all on this red-marked island. It won't hurt us."

Althaya shook her head. "Not while the god is breathing. No. We can wait!"

The black sea-like curve of rock above Grim was altering. It lost its concave outlines; shimmered, and grew thin and tall, like an ebony finger pointing skywards. And the tree on it was a tree no more, but a green vine clinging to its sides and drooping white blossoms across its black edges.

Althaya and Randolph withdrew from the altar; went higher on the rockside. Grim stared at the changes working all around him. Not far away was another red-marked island. Between the altar island and that other, the ground lifted and fell restlessly.

Tlokine came toward the altar, her guards drawing back and away from the change.

Grim whispered, "Can you stand pain?"

"Pain? No, I hate it. When the knife touches me—"

"I don't mean that. I have an idea. I'm going to be tortured anyhow, but I'd rather make a break for freedom than—"

Tlokine laughed incredulously, "They would shoot you down, even if you were free to run. And you're not. You're bound."

Grim laughed harshly, "No time to argue—follow me!"

He rolled off the altar. He hit the sloping rock beneath it with a thud that jarred his bones, but he kept on rolling. He went down the slope to the red marker—

He went by the marker, and the Change caught his ropes and twisted them into upright snakes that writhed in queer formations. It bent him forward, knotted his insides into lumps.

But he was free.

He tried to run, and could not. He overcame the agony in him to crawl, one arm and one leg after another, dragging himself along. The island came nearer and nearer. He expected disintegrator pellets to thud into him before he realized that Black Randolph wanted him to die slowly. He imagined the pirate was laughing insanely, watching the Change almost tear him apart.

Grim put a hand over the red mark and the relief from pain was so great he almost fainted. His teeth dug into his lip and forced him forward. Going over the marker, he crumpled into a ball.

"Grim! Grim Thorsen!"

Tlokine lay many feet from his safety zone, twisted and huddled, the Change having its will of her. He knew she couldn't take that any longer—and live.

He felt sweat break out all over him. He had to go out there and bring her in. Grim closed his eyes and ran for her. The Change caught him, shook him, tortured him. Grim fought with his body and his will; put a hand on her and dragged. He brought her in as a wolf might bring in the carcass of a deer; slowly, inch by inch.

Tlokine was almost dead when she crumpled inside the marker. Grim worked over her frantically. The Change was subsiding.

She opened her slant brown eyes. Grim cried, "They'll be coming for us. The storm is almost over. We have to run for it."

Tlokine whispered, "The stables. We'll need horses."

THEY made a dash before the Change was through. There was pain, but nothing compared to what they had undergone. Grim saw Randolph on the edge of the marker, bowling with rage. He was quivering with the eagerness to set out after them, but the Storm deterred him.

Inside a huge oval of red splashing that stretched as far as he could see, the white-walled stables stood. Grim threw open the low oak doors and ran inside. He hunted for the horses he wanted. He scanned their back and chests, sought the not too muscular neck of the racing horse.

He went swiftly, making his eyes perform snap judgments.

He drew out a chestnut and a bay. He saddled them, helped Tlokine up.

Seizing a quirt from the stable wall, he drove the other horses ahead of him, out beyond the red markers where the world of Stormland once more brooded quietly, its landscape new and more spectacular than before.

* * * * *

The Thing that they called Kohonnes was dead. Its metal sides and glassite screens were polished and bright. Moments before it had been living, humming and glowing with the energy that fed it, bringing the Storm and the Change across the world that held it.

A man moved his hand on the last dial. Inside the machine something clicked. The man turned away and went slowly down the marble steps. . . .

* * * * *

Crouched low on the withers of the bay, Grim rode for his life. A little ahead of him, Tlokine pummeled her chestnut with sandalled heels. Grim turned in the saddle and stared behind him. There was no one in sight—yet.

Tlokine cried, "We could make better time if we knew when the storms would come. Not knowing, we have to stay close to the islands, instead of cutting across toward the Dark Temple."

"And Althaya—she knows! She can come straight for us. The warning that she gets comes in time for her to go toward an island and make it before the Change comes. Is that what you mean?"

Tlokine nodded. Grim muttered, "Our lead doesn't mean much, then. They'll round up the horses we scattered. They'll catch us before we can get to the Temple."

They urged their mounts to a faster pace. They clung to sweat-wet necks and manes as the horses flashed their hocks above the roughly humped ground. They went by one tall, metallic needle-tower after another. The towers stood like rigid fingers against the horizon as they went on and on.

Grim brooded above the whipping mane of his chestnut, "If the thing that sends the change is a machine, then it would

need the towers to broadcast its force. It's limited in range, itself. The towers give it a wide radius of effectiveness. Now the question is—what operates only in a limited range?"

He thought of radio waves, but the ionized heavieside would throw them around the planet. He shook his head, whispering, "Some sort of wave-radio or energy."

Grim lifted his eyes to the next tower and scanned it. He growled, "If I still had my disintegrator I'd try a potshot at those interlacing wires on top of it. I bet that'd stop the Change. But without that—"

His mind raced as did the hooves of the chestnut. A scowl came and sat on his face. Then, after a while, his eyes brightened. He whispered, "It might work, at that—"

He reined in the chestnut; called to Tlokiné, and headed for the nearest tower. She stared at him as he swung down from the horses and began to climb the tower, sliding fingers and toes into the tiny slots between the interlanted metal beams. He went up and up until he reached the round ribboned globe with the tiny wires inside it. It was fastened to the tower by slotted bolts.

Using his belt-buckle as a screwdriver, he unthreaded the bolts, found that the globe came away easily from the tower. It was composed of thin aluminsteel ribbons and wires of spiderweb thinness. He tucked it under an arm and went backwards down the tower.

Tlokiné said, "What are you doing?" when he knelt and fumbled at the wiring setup.

He grinned, "This thing must broadcast vibrations of some sort. In some manner, they cause the Change. If I could jam those vibrations in the same way that a radio broadcast can be jammed—maybe there wouldn't be any Change to slow us down."

Tlokiné looked back along the path they had come. She said, "Althaya and her men will soon be here. You are wasting time, Grim Thorssen."

He shook his yellow-thatched head. "Not the way I figure it. Soldiers marching in rhythmic steps across a bridge have been known to smash it. That's why they

break step all the time. It changes the pulse of the vibration on the bridge. It jars—but does not destroy.

"Same way here. Ultrasonic vibrations can't be heard, but they can do plenty of damage. They can kill frogs and tiny fishes. They can cause heat and put out a flame—oh, and a hundred other things. But—if the vibratory rate of those ultrasonic waves can be damped by other wave-impulses — their usefulness is destroyed."

Tlokiné didn't understand him, but she came closer and watched as his agile fingers toyed with the thin wires. He smiled, "This globe is tuned to the master vibrator. It picks up the waves and amplifies them. I want it to do that—but to change the wave-pulse to a different rhythm!"

Grim worked blindly, guessing. He knew his only chance for a real test would come when the Change swept across the world. He couldn't wait for that. Althaya and Black Randolph would have hunted them down by that time.

Setting the globe across the pommel of his saddle, Grim held it carefully as he thumped his heels into the horse's side. They rode swiftly out across the plain.

And then, as Tlokiné turned in her saddle, she saw them.

ALTHAYA and Black Randolph rode before a dozen men, stooped low over the necks of their straining mounts. They could hear the pirate's bellowing, triumphant laughter.

"No use," whispered Tlokiné. "They'll catch us now."

But Grim saw Althaya point toward a needle-towered island, heard her call out imperiously. The Viking jabbed his heels into the chestnut. He yelled, "The Change! She senses that it's coming!"

"We're too far from the islands! It will catch us—kill the horses, then us!"

Grim fiddled desperately with the wiring of the ribboned globe. He whispered prayers as he recircuited.

It was no use.

The pain came and crumpled him up and toppled him from the saddle. He struck the ground and rolled, but his hands held to the globe. Lying flat on his belly, teeth drawing blood from his lips

with the pain that wracked him, he drove his fingers into the meshed wires and tugged and rearranged them.

A hump of ground rose between his hands; flung the ribboned globe from him, sent it rolling like a rubber ball on the trough of seawaves. Whimpering, Grim went after it, dragging himself along.

He caught it, held it close to his chest. His hand grabbed a wire—

The pain was gone. Grim lay panting, grinning. Tlokine knelt, staring, whispering, "The Change—it's all around us—but where we are, there isn't any Change!"

There was a radius of thirty feet where the ground lay frozen in its strange formations, an island in the midst of the hub that was the globe. Grim got to his feet. He held the globe in hands that shook weakly with the reaction. Tlokine went to the horses, soothed and stroked them. After a while the horses got to their legs.

They mounted. From the distant island where they watched, Althaya and Black Randolph screamed their rage. But Grim only laughed and waved an arm. With the globe in his hands, he rode the chestnut over the motionless ground, while all around him the earth rocked and bubbled and thrust itself upward into terrible contortions.

"It's like a magic symbol," whispered Tlokine, staring at the ribboned globe.

"People would have called this a magic land, once," said Grim. "But it's sheer science that makes the Change—and sheer science that knows the key to counteract it."

They went straight across the magic land, riding without fear of the Storm that swept outside the circumference of their enchanted circle. As they moved, the circle of safety moved with them, with the globe as its hub. The faster they went, the faster moved the circle.

Grim flung a hoarse laugh between his white teeth. He said, "At this rate, we'll leave Randolph so far behind, he'll never get us."

He turned in his saddle to look behind him—

AND saw the pirate and the redheaded priestess scarcely five hundred yards away, flying after them. Black Randolph held a disintegrator in his hand. As he

came within the radius of a needle-tower, he took careful aim at it and blasted the ribboned globe atop it into drifting powder.

Tlokine cried out, pointing, "The path to the Dark Temple!"

Huge rock cliffs loomed up before them, towering like a giant's twisted playthings where he might have dropped them. Spires and points of sandstone, ridges of granite and volcanic tuffs, rimrock and crumbled talus; they made fantastic colors where the sun caught them. And running straight between the boulders was a crimson road, smooth as placid water.

Grim cried, "Go on ahead. I'll hold them off. If that Kohonnes of yours has any power at all—tell him this is the time to use it!"

Grim brought his foot against the bay's rump, sent it racing terrified onto the scarlet road. Clinging to the reins, Tlokine had no time to cry her refusal to leave Grim. The bay took her away fast, leaving Grim alone.

Randolph shouted, "I have you now, Thorssen. Don't hope for a blast of my disintegrator, either. You're going back to that altar. Eight days I said—and eight days it still is!"

Grim kicked his feet free of the stirrups and leaped to the rock. Putting his hands flat on the stone, he swung himself to the first ledge, then to the second. With booted toes and clinging fingers, he pulled himself straight up the face of the cliff.

Randolph howled; threw himself like a madman at the cliff. He came after the Viking, rasping spaceoaths beneath his breath. Grim caught a blurred glimpse of Althaya spurring her roan along the scarlet roadway, closing the distance between Tlokine and herself.

Rock shattered above him. Grim stared at a boulder coming loose under the blast of a disintegrator pellet; came bouncing downward. Grim flattened himself, hearing Black Randolph cry, "It'll knock you down to my level, Thorssen."

The boulder struck on a lip of stone and went bounding beyond him. Grim drew a breath and climbed faster. He came to a flat section that topped the surrounding bluffs. He scrambled onto it as a blast from Randolph's disintegrator caught the rocklip that he was on and sent it flying.

He lay dazed, knowing the pirate was

climbing after him, but unable to do anything about it. He opened his mouth and gulped in air, hearing a steady roaring in his ears. He knelt, stood up; and still the roaring swelled and grew. He finally recognized it as a waterfall.

Black Randolph swung over the edge of the cliff and came charging across its flat top, head down. His fists were balled into great clubs. Grim shook his head, got to a knee and then to both feet, waiting.

The pirate's charge was irresistible. It lifted Grim up and threw him backwards. He pummeled at the pirate, drove hard knuckles into his jaw and chest. But Randolph laughed in his throat and hammered back.

For one instant they stood locked, knee to knee. Their fists drove pain and agony into each other's ribs and bellies. Then Grim weakened. The long ride, the space crash, the wild flight took their fee. His legs buckled under the weariness that laid hot bands around them. He toppled, went down—

Black Randolph came for him in a low dive.

Grim closed his hand on a solid rock hump and lifted his feet. He threw them up in the manner of the ancient savatte. His foot caught Black Randolph in the chest and lifted him up and flung him high over him.

The pirate screamed. Grim turned; knelt on the edge of the cliff wall and saw the pirate falling, turning and twisting, into a deep gorge where a wide river flowed like a blue ribbon between crumpled rocks, fed by a tumbling waterfall.

Grim drew a deep breath and got to his feet. Far beneath him, at the end of the narrow crimson road, he could see a great black temple, with a door like a gaping mouth. Tokine was in that temple, and Althaya — and the thing they both called Kohonnes.

Grim began to run.

* * * * *

The two women faced each other at the foot of the bulking black machine that was their god.

"Here now you will die," breathed Althaya.

"Kohonnes will not let me die. He will

save me. It is you—who have been traitress to him—who will pay by going back to the breath..."

And above them, above the black hair and the red, the hundred eyes of the machine began to glow, and the muted throbbing went out from its bowels and touched its metal sides; and the god Kohonnes came to life.

* * * * *

GRIM slipped and staggered the last twenty feet down the side of the sheer grey rock. He landed on the crimson road, fifty feet from the mouthlike entrance to the Temple. He went at a lurching run, forgetting his weariness, thinking only of a lovely girl with white skin and green eyes and hair the color of a raven-wing.

He swung into the dark, cool interior; was dimly aware of slender black onyx columns lifting a hundred feet toward a dark ceiling.

Grim stopped. A voice reverberated in the Temple.

"You have disobeyed, Althaya. You—"

"Don't threaten me, Kohonnes! At this moment my people are coming. They will attack when I give the word. They will come in here and kill the girl and make you yield your secret to me. Then Althaya will have power unimaginable. Black Randolph—"

"—is dead," said Grim. "He fell into the gorge."

Grim stared upward. A black machine bulked huge and dark in the shadows. From a hundred facets, green bulb-lights glowed. Grim heard the machinery moving, saw the bulbs grow brighter as power poured into the thing.

"Who are you, Kohonnes?" he cried out in space *patois*.

"Eh? What's that? Who's out there? ... It isn't—can't be! Grim Thorssen?"

Grim laughed. He knew that voice anywhere.

"You old spacedog! What're you trying to do—ruin the Unions Council?"

"The Council? What have I to do with them?"

"The force this machine applies escapes into space. It bends the Caravans and the Fleet cruisers. It smashes them—sends them flying on into the void like so many

wrecked planets. They'll go on and on—until they find a planet to crash on or make an orbit around."

There was a pause. Althaya cried out harshly; whirled and fled toward the mouthlike door where light filtered in in grey beams.

The machine stopped humming. A door opened in it. A man with white hair and a smooth, shaven face stepped onto the floor of the temple. He grinned at the Viking, threw both arms high into the air.

Grim said, "Jasper Jones! I knew you'd gone into retirement—but I never thought you'd set yourself up as a god."

The old man laughed, keen blue eyes dancing. "I was always interested in sound, Grim. I had some theories, theories that my colleagues said were crazy, impractical. So when I retired I came to this little planet that I'd discovered a long time ago—and set myself up in comfort."

"I took amnesiac men and women from the space hospitals and gave them a new life. I let them build a new civilization for themselves, a new life. Where they would have had to spend the rest of their useless lives in sanatoriums, I gave them freedom, fresh air and a new world. Was that wrong?"

Grim said dryly, "Not the way you put it. But you could have established dams—something to keep that hellish force in place. And while we're on it—what in the name of the Empire is the thing?"

Jasper Jones waved at the machine. "Let's go inside. I'll tell you about it as we go. Come, Tokine."

"I said I was interested in sound. Perhaps I should say, vibratory impulses. You know Tyndal's experiments—sand figures on a vibrating plate, the motion of the plate along a nodal line. The sand on the plate rearranges and groups itself into regular patterns. Some of them are beautiful."

"You mean the method devised by Chladni? Where sand is put on a thin metal plate and a violin bow is scraped across its side?"

"Exactly. The sand is tossed away from the vibrating sections of the plate. It collects in areas of calm, undisturbed by the vibrations."

"You mean to tell me that's what this

entire planet is—a vibrating plate?" wondered Grim.

"A hundred years or more after Chladni, Dr. Fredericka Blankner advanced the theory that all life, all matter in the universe, followed a pattern somewhat similar to the dancing sands on a Chladni plate. Even human bodies vibrate at a certain impulse."

"I studied for years on that theory. Then when I found this planet, I fitted it out during my vacations. When I retired and brought the spaceshock cases here—I was ready to follow and prove those theories."

A deep, sullen roar grew into a thundering volcano of sound, beyond the Temple gateway. Grim cried, "Althaya and her people. They've come to learn your secret, Jones. Quick, man—some weapons! We can hold them off easily enough if—"

Jasper Jones smiled and shook his head. "Outside of the vibration machine, I have no weapon. And that is not a weapon. I have used it—sending the Changes and the Storms across the planet—to check on reactions and nodal results."

Grim laughed harshly. "Man, you've unleashed something with that machine. The redhead is desperate. Black Randolph gave her ideas. She won't know where to stop if *she* gets hold of the machine. We have to stop her."

"With what? The people have learned that the calm areas on the planet exist inside red markers. We can't catch them napping."

GRIM grabbed the old man and shook him. He rasped, "Maybe you don't mind getting a couple of barbed knives stuck in your hide, but *I* do. Where are your plans for this—this machine?"

Jones led him to a *selassi*-metal desk, pressed a stud; a thin, flat drawer slid into view. Grim drove his hands into the mass of blueprints and specifications. He dragged them out and spread them on the floor in front of him. He ran his grey eyes over print after print.

He grinned. "Maybe we can stop them at that, Jasper."

"Sound is no weapon. Oh, it's been used against frogs and the lower vertebrate forms, but—"

A shower of arrows made a clanking noise against the face of the machine. Grim could hear Althaya screaming. "It is only a man inside it. I heard his voice. He knew the golden-bair. Break the god, my people." Something thumped into the machine; shook it wildly.

Jasper Jones screamed, "They will smash the bulbs if they keep that up!"

Grim grabbed him, shook him. "Listen to me! I don't want to hurt your people... but we have to stop them. We must rewire the machine—reduce the frequency of the vibrations into audible pitch—step up the decibels to two hundred or more."

"But that would be intense sound—painful!"

"You bet it would. It would give those howling babies out there the sweetest case of what used to be called 'shell shock' or 'battle fatigue' you ever saw. But—it's our only chance!"

Jones stared at him, touching his lips with a dry tongue. He whispered, "Yes. Yes, I see what you mean. But—"

The battering ram thumped the machine. The floor under their feet shook. Jones nodded hastily. "Yes, I'll do it. I'll hurry."

He went to a round opening in the floor, caught a metal rod protruding through it, and swung himself down. Grim caught Tlokine and drew her to the *selaisi*-metal table and hunted in its drawers. He found cotton and tore loose several strips. He crumpled the cotton into tiny balls.

"I'm going to put these in your ears, Tlokine. You won't be able to hear much, then. Just sit still. Jones and I—we're going to do our best to stop those babies outside. When we do, things are going to happen in a hurry. I want you to be prepared."

He put the cotton tabs in her ear, whispered, "I love you, darling," and caught the sliding rod in his hands and swung down.

Grim walked the cat-walks between the throbbing engines in the dim light of myriad bulbs set in plastic casings. He saw the enclosed dynamos that forced the incredible vibrations outward to the needle towers that picked them up and threw them around the planet.

On a metal floor below him, old Jasper Jones was disconnecting terminals and re-

hooking them. Grim joined him. It was close, hot work inside the huge machine. Sweat dripped down Grim's forehead and ran into his eyes and mouth. With the back of his forearm he swabbed at his face and worked on.

He heard the boom of the improvised battering ram thud into the metal wall; saw the great tubes shake and flicker. The metal floor quivered under his feet.

A woman screamed. Grim came to his feet, incredulous, hearing Tlokine cry, "It's Black Randolph! He's coming through the back way—"

Grim whispered, "He's dead. I saw him fall from the cliff."

He leaped; came up short as Jasper Jones clawed at his arm with aged hands. The old man babbled, "The machine is our only chance."

Randolph was roaring in triumph, "I have your girl, Thorsen. Come out of there or I'll give her a disintegrator pellet. Ha! You didn't watch me long enough, Thorsen, I missed the rocks—went into the water. It carried me under the temple, to stone steps. They led me—here! You hear me, Thorsen? Come out of there!"

"I hear you. I'm coming."

Instead he turned and looked at the wiring terminals where Jasper Jones toiled, his hands a blur of movement and his white hair wet with sweat. The old man's panting made a harsh sound in the fetid air.

"We almost through?" Grim whispered.

"Almost... just these, now... another turn to tighten them—there!"

A switch with a glittering red handle was a foot above Jones' bent head. Grim went for it in a flying leap. His hands came up and the switch went down and—

Hell broke loose.

SOUND welled up, pitched high and keening and almost inaudible. What was heard, was jarring and maddening. It took a man's nerve-ends out and scratched on them until his entire body was dancing. Grim stood shivering, trying to lift his hands to shelter his eardrums; discovering this his arms were jumping free of his will.

He whispered, "I can't do it, I can't turn it off." Something rolled against his leg. It was old Jasper Jones, eyes rolling

in his head, a bubbly white froth at his mouth.

Grim's knees shook. They went in different directions and he pitched to the metal floor. His body danced a weird saraband against the metal. He thought, "If something doesn't happen, we'll all go mad!" He knew that sound could crush them; that this sound that was jumbling their brains was enough for that, given the time to build itself.

His hands shook. His body quivered. His brain throbbed, and blackness swept down and blinded him.

THE SOUND was gone. Someone was shaking him by the shoulder, urgently. Grim opened tired eyelids. Tlokiné bent over him, fright making her red nails dig deep into his shoulder.

Grim said words, but he did not hear them. He put hands to his ears, found them plugged with cotton. The sound came through, a little, but it was muffled, ineffective.

He got up and took the wad of cotton that Tlokiné still held and forced two balls of it into old Jasper Jones' ears. After a while the old man sat up and looked at them.

Grim said, even though he knew they could not hear him, "I'm going up and tie up Black Randolph for once and all. Then we'll turn this thing off and parley with the others."

The pirate was in even worse state than Grim had been; he had been nearer to the vast loudspeakers, had felt the numbing shock of those sound-waves. Like a man in water, close to an explosion, his brain and lungs had hemorrhaged. His chest was bloated, swollen. Grim covered him, turned to the lovely Althaya; covered her quickly, too.

He turned off the machine and stood in a silence that was almost as dreadful as the sound had been. Jasper Jones and Tlokiné came up the floor opening, removing their earplugs.

"They got it the worst. They were right on top of the high pressure waves coming from the speaker," Grim said, gesturing at the covered bodies. "The others, outside—they were further away, as we were. They'll be all right, in a little while."

Jones said, "It was horrible."

Tlokiné whispered, "It did not bother me. I was too far away. But when I saw Black Randolph and Althaya bend over, clutching at their stomachs — what was it, Grim?"

"High pressure waves, that hit anything in their path with terrific impact. It's sound, but not sound as we generally think of it. After the first wave a section of air follows, acts as suction. Repeated high pressure and suction waves—well, they rip out tissues and smash blood vessels."

Jasper Jones looked at him. He licked his lips with a dry tongue. He wavered, "This is the end of my experiments, then? I can't go on. You'll make your report and—"

"I'll report a natural phenomena. Build sound dams, old timer. After all, it's a pretty destructive thing you've built. If Tlokiné hadn't been a good distance from that speaker, she'd be as Althaya and Black Randolph are. And speaking of Althaya—how did she know when the Change would come?"

Jones said, "I operated on her while she was in the amnesiac hospital. She was a violent case. Brain surgery helped her. I put in a thin slip of metal foil. Later I discovered that the foil caught the sub-sonic rhythm of the machine as it warmed. Its vibrations told her what was coming."

"Good enough. Give half the planet to the amnesiac men and women. Let Tlokiné rule them. Keep half the planet for your own experiments."

Jasper Jones grinned slyly, "I'm an old man. My planet needs new blood. Tlokiné as queen would need a king."

"I've been thinking the same thing myself," chuckled Grim, watching Tlokiné flush red. "After I make my report I'll be back." He bent and lifted the girl in his arms. "We're going to talk over the future, Jasper. I'll let you know what Tlokiné thinks of the idea."

Jasper Jones grinned. The white arms around Grim's neck and the red lips pressed to his gave the old man his answer. He sighed. It would be nice, having toddlers around the place. There was so much he could teach them about sound.

Jasper Jones sat down and began to plot his space-dams.

Mars is Heaven!

By RAY BRADBURY

You won't believe this story, which is a strange thing to say. Captain John Black and his crew didn't believe it either, but they saw it through. And so will you.

THE SHIP CAME DOWN FROM space. It came down from the stars and the black velocities, and the shining movements and the silent gulfs of space. It was a new ship, the only one of its kind, it had fire in its belly and men in its body, and it moved with clean silence, fiery and hot. In it were seventeen men, including a captain. A crowd had gathered at the New York tarmac and shouted and waved their hands up into the sunlight, and the rocket had jerked up, bloomed out great flowers of heat and color, and run away into space on the first voyage to Mars!

Now it was decelerating with metal efficiency in the upper zones of Martian atmosphere. It was still a thing of beauty and strength. It had shorn through meteor streams, it had moved in the majestic black midnight waters of space like a pale sea leviathan, it had passed the sickly, pocked mass of the ancient moon, and thrown itself onward into one nothingness following another. The men within it had been battered, thrown about, sickened, made well again, scarred, made pale, flushed, each in his turn. One man had died after a fall, but, now, seventeen of the original eighteen with their eyes clear in their heads and their faces pressed to the thick glass ports of the rocket, were watching Mars swing up under them.

"Mars! Mars! Good old Mars, here we are!" cried Navigator Lustig.

"Good old Mars!" said Samuel Hinkston, archaeologist.

"Well," said Captain John Black.

The ship landed softly on a lawn of green grass. Outside, upon the lawn, stood an iron deer. Further up the lawn, a tall brown Victorian house sat in the quiet sunlight, all covered with scrolls and rococo, its windows made of blue and pink and yellow and green colored glass. Upon the porch were hairy geraniums and an old

swing which was hooked into the porch ceiling and which now swung back and forth, back and forth, in a little breeze. At the top of the house, was a cupola with diamond, leaded-glass windows, and a dunce-cap roof! Through the front window you could see an ancient piano with yellow keys and a piece of music titled BEAUTIFUL OHIO sitting on the music rest.

Around the rocket in four directions spread the little town, green and motionless in the Martian spring. There were white houses and red brick ones, and tall elm trees blowing in the wind, and tall maples and horse chestnuts. And church steeples with golden bells silent in them.

The men in the rocket looked out and saw this. Then they looked at one another and then they looked out again. They held on to each other's elbows, suddenly unable to breathe, it seemed. Their faces grew pale and they blinked constantly, running from glass port to glass port of the ship.

"I'll be damned," whispered Lustig, rubbing his face with his numb fingers, his eyes wet. "I'll be damned, damned, damned."

"It can't be, it just can't be," said Samuel Hinkston.

"Lord," said Captain John Black.

There was a call from the chemist. "Sir, the atmosphere is fine for breathing, sir." Black turned slowly. "Are you sure?"

"No doubt of it, sir."

"Then we'll go out," said Lustig.

"Lord, yes," said Samuel Hinkston.

"Hold on," said Captain John Black. "Just a moment. Nobody gave any orders."

"But, sir—"

"Sir, nothing. How do we know what this is?"

"We know what it is, sir," said the chemist. "It's a small town with good air in it, sir."

"And it's a small town the like of Earth



towns," said Samuel Hinkston, the archaeologist. "Incredible. It can't be, but it is."

Captain John Black looked at him, idly. "Do you think that the civilizations of two planets can progress at the same rate and evolve in the same way, Hinkston?"

"I wouldn't have thought so, sir."

Captain Black stood by the port. "Look out there. The geraniums. A specialized plant. That specific variety has only been known on Earth for fifty years. Think of the thousands of years of time it takes to evolve plants. Then tell me if it is logical that the Martians should have: one, leaded glass windows; two, cupolas; three, porch swings; four, an instrument that looks like a piano and probably is a piano; and, five, if you look closely, if a Martian composer would have published a piece of music titled, strangely enough, BEAUTIFUL OHIO. All of which means that we have an Ohio River here on Mars!"

"It is quite strange, sir."

"Strange, hell, it's absolutely impossible, and I suspect the whole bloody shooting setup. Something's screwy here, and I'm not leaving the ship until I know what it is."

"Oh, sir," said Lustig.

"Damn it," said Samuel Hinkston. "Sir, I want to investigate this at first hand. It may be that there are similar patterns of thought, movement, civilization on every planet in our system. We may be on the threshold of the great psychological and metaphysical discovery in our time, sir, don't you think?"

"I'm willing to wait a moment," said Captain John Black.

"It may be, sir, that we are looking upon a phenomenon that, for the first time, would absolutely prove the existence of a God, sir."

"There are many people who are of good faith without such proof, Mr. Hinkston."

"I'm one myself, sir. But certainly a thing like this, out there," said Hinkston, "could not occur without divine intervention, sir. It fills me with such terror and elation I don't know whether to laugh or cry, sir."

"Do neither, then, until we know what we're up against."

"Up against, sir?" inquired Lustig. "I see that we're up against nothing, sir. It's a good quiet, green town, much like the

one I was born in, and I like the looks of it."

"When were you born, Lustig?"

"In 1910, sir."

"That makes you fifty years old, now, doesn't it?"

"This being 1960, yes, sir."

"And you, Hinkston?"

"1920, sir. In Illinois. And this looks swell to me, sir."

"This couldn't be Heaven," said the Captain, ironically. "Though, I must admit, it looks peaceful and cool, and pretty much like Green Bluff, where I was born, in 1915." He looked at the chemist. "The air's all right, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then, tell you what we'll do. Lustig, you and Hinkston and I will fetch ourselves out to look this town over. The other 14 men will stay aboard ship. If anything untoward happens, lift the ship and get the hell out, do you hear what I say, Craner?"

"Yes, sir. The hell out we'll go, sir. Leaving you?"

"A loss of three men's better than a whole ship. If something bad happens get back to Earth and warn the next Rocket, that's Lingle's Rocket, I think, which will be completed and ready to take off some time around next Christmas, what he has to meet up with. If there's something hostile about Mars we certainly want the next expedition to be well armed."

"So are we, sir. We've got a regular arsenal with us."

"Tell the men to stand by the guns, then, as Lustig and Hinkston and I go out."

"Right, sir."

"Come along, Lustig, Hinkston."

The three men walked together, down through the levels of the ship.

IT WAS a beautiful spring day. A robin sat on a blossoming apple tree and sang continuously. Showers of petal snow sifted down when the wind touched the apple tree, and the blossom smell drifted upon the air. Somewhere in the town, somebody was playing the piano and the music came and went, came and went, softly, drowsily. The song was BEAUTIFUL DREAMER. Somewhere else, a phonograph, scratchy and faded, was hissing out a record of

ROAMIN' IN THE GLOAMIN', sung by Harry Lauder.

The three men stood outside the ship. The port closed behind them. At every window, a face pressed, looking out. The large metal guns pointed this way and that, ready.

Now the phonograph record being played was:

"Oh Give me a June Night
The Moon Light and you—"

Lustig began to tremble. Samuel Hinkston did likewise.

Hinkston's voice was so feeble and uneven that the captain had to ask him to repeat what he had said. "I said, sir, that I think I have solved this, all of this, sir!"

"And what is the solution, Hinkston?"

The soft wind blew. The sky was serene and quiet and somewhere a stream of water ran through the cool caverns and tree-shadings of a ravine. Somewhere a horse and wagon trotted and rolled by, humping.

"Sir, it must be, it has to be, this is the *only* solution! Rocket travel began to Mars in the years before the first World War, sir!"

The captain stared at his archaeologist. "No!"

"But, yes, sir! You must admit, look at all of this! How else to explain it, the houses, the lawns, the iron deer, the flowers, the pianos, the music!"

"Hinkston, Hinkston, oh," and the captain put his hand to his face, shaking his head, his hand shaking now, his lips blue.

"Sir, listen to me," Hinkston took his elbow, persuasively and looked up into the captain's face, pleading. "Say that there were some people in the year 1905, perhaps, who hated wars and wanted to get away from Earth and they got together, some scientists, in secret, and built a rocket and came out here to Mars."

"No, no, Hinkston."

"Why not? The world was a different place in 1905, they could have kept it a secret much more easily."

"But the work, Hinkston, the work of building a complex thing like a rocket, oh, no, no." The captain looked at his shoes, looked at his hands, looked at the houses, and then at Hinkston.

"And they came up here, and naturally the houses they built were similar to Earth houses because they brought the cultural

architecture with them, and here it is!"

"And they've lived here all these years?" said the captain.

"In peace and quiet, sir, yes. Maybe they made a few trips, enough to bring enough people here for one small town, and then stopped, for fear of being discovered. That's why the town seems so old-fashioned. I don't see a thing, myself, that is older than the year 1927, do you?"

"No, frankly, I don't, Hinkston."

"These are *our* people, sir. This is an American city; it's definitely not European!"

"That—that's right, too, Hinkston."

"Or maybe, just maybe, sir, rocket travel is older than we think. Perhaps it started in some part of the world hundreds of years ago, was discovered and kept secret by a small number of men, and they came to Mars, with only occasional visits to Earth over the centuries."

"You make it sound almost reasonable."

"It is, sir. It has to be. We have the proof here before us, all we have to do now, is find some people and verify it!"

"You're right there, of course. We can't just stand here and talk. Did you bring your gun?"

"Yes, but we won't need it."

"We'll see about it. Come along, we'll ring that doorbell and see if anyone is home."

Their boots were deadened of all sound in the thick green grass. It smelled from a fresh mowing. In spite of himself, Captain John Black felt a great peace come over him. It had been thirty years since he had been in a small town, and the buzzing of spring bees on the air lulled and quieted him, and the fresh look of things was a balm to the soul.

THEY set foot upon the porch. Hollow echoes sounded from under the boards as they walked across the porch and stood before the screen door. Inside, they could see a bead curtain hung across the hall entry, and a crystal chandelier and a Maxfield Parrish painting framed on one wall over a comfortable Morris Chair. The house smelled old, and of the attic, and infinitely comfortable. You could hear the tinkle of ice rattling in a lemonade pitcher. In a distant kitchen, because of the heat of the day, someone was preparing a soft,

lemon drink. Someone was humming under their breath, high and sweet.

Captain John Black rang the bell.

FOOTSTEPS, dainty and thin, came along the hall and a kind faced lady of some forty years, dressed in the sort of dress you might expect in the year 1909, peered out at them.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Beg your pardon," said Captain Black, uncertainly. "But we're looking for, that is, could you help us, I mean." He stopped. She looked out at him with dark wondering eyes.

"If you're selling something," she said. "I'm much too busy and I haven't time." She turned to go.

"No, wait," he cried, bewilderedly. "What town is this?"

She looked him up and down as if he were crazy. "What do you mean, what town is it? How could you be in a town and not know what town it was?"

The captain looked as if he wanted to go sit under a shady apple tree. "I beg your pardon," he said. "But we're strangers here. We're from Earth, and we want to know how this town got here and you got here."

"Are you census takers?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"What do you want then?" she demanded.

"Well," said the captain.

"Well?" she asked.

"How long has this town been here?" he wondered.

"It was built in 1868," she snapped at them.

"Is this a game?"

"No, not a game," cried the captain. "Oh, God," he said. "Look here. We're from Earth!"

"From where?" she said.

"From Earth!" he said.

"Where's that?" she said.

"From Earth," he cried.

"Out of the ground, do you mean?" she wondered.

"No, from the planet Earth!" he almost shouted. "Here," he insisted, "come out on the porch and I'll show you."

"No," she said, "I won't come out there, you are all evidently quite mad from the sun."

Lustig and Hinkston stood behind the captain. Hinkston now spoke up. "Mrs.," he said. "We came in a flying ship across space, among the stars. We came from the third planet from the sun, Earth, to this planet, which is Mars. Now do you understand, Mrs.?"

"Mad from the sun," she said, taking hold of the door. "Go away now, before I call my husband who's upstairs taking a nap, and he'll beat you all with his fists."

"But—" said Hinkston. "This is Mars, is it not?"

"This," explained the woman, as if she were addressing a child, "is Green Lake, Wisconsin, on the continent of America, surrounded by the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, on a place called the world, or sometimes, the Earth, go away now, good-bye!"

She slammed the door.

The three men stood before the door with their hands up in the air toward it, as if pleading with her to open it once more.

They looked at one another.

"Let's knock the door down," said Lustig.

"We can't," sighed the captain.

"Why not?"

"She didn't do anything bad, did she? We're the strangers here. This is private property. Good God, Hinkston!" He went and sat down on the porchstep and started to get sick.

"What, sir?"

"Did, did it ever strike you, that maybe we got ourselves, ourselves somehow, some way, fouled up. And, by accident, came back and landed on Earth?"

"Oh, sir, oh, sir, oh oh, sir." And Hinkston sat down numbly and thought about it.

Lustig stood up in the sunlight. "How could we have done that?"

"I don't know, I don't know, just let me think."

Hinkston said, "But we checked every mile of the way, and we saw Mars and our chronometers said so many miles gone, and we went past the moon and out out into space and here we are, on Mars. I'm sure we're on Mars, sir."

Lustig said, "But, suppose, just suppose that, by accident, in space, in time, or something, we landed on a planet in space, in another time. Suppose this is Earth, thirty

or fifty years ago? Maybe we got lost in the dimensions, do you think?"

"Oh, go away, Lustig."

"Are the men in the ship keeping an eye on us, Hinkston?"

"At their guns, sir."

Lustig went to the door, rang the bell. When the door opened again, he asked, "What year is this?"

"1926, of course!" cried the woman, furiously, and slammed the door again.

"Did you hear that?" Lustig ran back to them, wildly. "She said! 1926! We have gone back in time! This is Earth!"

LUSTIG sat down and the three men let the wonder and terror of the thought afflict them. Their hands stirred fitfully on their knees. The wind blew, nodding the locks of hair on their heads.

The captain stood up, brushing off his pants. "I never thought it would be like this. I didn't ask for a thing like this. It's too much. It scares the hell out of me. How can a thing like this happen? I wish we had brought Einstein with us."

"Will anybody in the whole town believe us?" wondered Hinkston. "Are we playing around with something dangerous? Time, I mean. Shouldn't we just take off and go home?"

"No. Not until we know what's doing here. We'll try another house. Let's walk down the block."

They walked three houses down to a little white cottage under an oak tree. "I like to be as logical as I can get," said the captain. "And I don't think we've put our finger on it yet." He nodded at the town. "How does this sound to you, Hinkston? Suppose, as you said originally, that rocket travel occurred years ago. And when the Earth people had lived here a number of years they began to get homesick for earth. First a mild neurosis about it, then a full-fledged psychosis. Then, threatened insanity. What would you do, as a psychiatrist, if faced with such a problem?"

Hinkston thought. "Well. I think I'd rearrange the civilization on Mars so it resembled Earth more and more each day. If there was any way of reproducing every plant, every road and every lake, and even an ocean, I would do so. Then I would, by some vast crowd hypnosis, theoretically anyway, convince everyone in a town this



size that this really was Earth, not Mars at all."

"Good enough, Hinkston. I think we're on the right track now. That woman in that house back there, just *thinks* she's living on Earth. It protects her sanity. She and all the others in this town are the patients of the greatest experiment in migration and hypnosis you will ever lay your eyes on in your life."

"That's it, sir!" cried Lustig.

"Right, sir!" said Hinkston.

"Well," the captain sighed. "Now we're getting somewhere. I feel better. It all sounds a bit more logical now. This talk about time and going back and forth and traveling in time turns my stomach upside down. But, *this way*—" He actually smiled for the first time in a month. "Well. It looks as if we'll be fairly welcome here."

"Or, will we, sir?" said Lustig. "After all, like the Pilgrims, these people came here to escape Earth. Maybe they won't be too happy to see us, sir. Maybe they'll try to drive us out or kill us?"

"We have superior weapons if that should happen. Anyway, all we can do is try. This next house now. Up we go."

But they had hardly crossed the lawn when Lustig stopped and looked off across the town, down the quiet, dreaming afternoon street. "Sir," he said.

"What is it, Lustig?" asked the captain.

"Oh, sir, sir, what I see, what I do see now before me, oh, oh—" said Lustig, and he began to cry. His fingers came up, twisting and trembling, and his face was all wonder and joy and incredulity. He sounded as if any moment he might go quite insane with happiness. He looked down the street and he began to run, stumbling, awkwardly, falling, picking

himself up, and running on. "Oh God, God, thank you, God! Thank you!"

The captain and Hinkston stood as if unable to move.

Hinkston said, "What's wrong with him, captain?"

"Don't let him get away!" The captain broke into a run.

Now Lustig was running at full speed, shouting. He turned into a yard half way down the little shady side street and leaped up upon the porch of a large green house with an iron rooster on the roof.

He was beating upon the door, shouting and hollering and crying, when Hinkston and the captain ran up and stood in the yard.

The door opened. Lustig yanked the screen wide and in a high wail of discovery and happiness, cried out, "Grandma! Grandpa!"

Two old people stood in the doorway, their faces lighting up.

"Albert!" Their voices piped and they rushed out to embrace and pat him on the back and move around him. "Albert, oh, Albert, it's been so many years! How you've grown, boy, how big you are, boy, oh, Albert boy, how are you?"

"Grandma, Grandpa!" sobbed Albert Lustig. "Good to see you! You look fine, fine! Oh, fine!" He held them, turned them, kissed them, hugged them, cried on them, held them out again, blinked at the little old people. The sun was in the sky, the wind blew, the grass was green, the screen door stood open.

"Come in, lad, come in, there's lemonade for you, fresh, lots of it!"

"Grandma, Grandpa, good to see you! I've got friends down here! Here!" Lustig turned and waved wildly at the captain and Hinkston who, all during the adventure on the porch, had stood in the shade of a tree, holding onto each other. "Captain, captain, come up, come up, I want you to meet my grandfolks!"

"Howdy, howdy," said the folks. "Come up, come on in, there's plenty for all. Any friend of Albert's is ours, too! Don't stand there with your mouths open! Come on, come on!"

IN THE living room of the old house it was cool and a grandfather clock ticked high and long and bronzed in one

corner. There were soft pillows on large couches and walls filled with books and a rug cut in a thick rose pattern and antimacassars pinned to furniture, and lemonade in the hand, sweating, and cool on the thirsty tongue.

"Here's to our health." Grandma tipped her glass to her porcelain teeth.

"How long you *been* here, Grandma?" said Lustig.

"A good many years," she said, tartly. "Ever since we died."

"Ever since you what?" asked Captain John Black, putting his drink down.

"Oh, yes," Lustig looked at his captain.

"They've been dead thirty years."

"And you *is* there, calmly!" cried the captain.

"Tush," said the old woman, and winked glitteringly at John Black. "Who are we to question what happens? Here we are. What's life, anyways? Who does what for why and where? All we know is here we are, alive again, and no questions asked. A second chance." She toddled over and held out her thin wrist to Captain John Black. "Feel." He felt. "Solid, ain't it?" she asked. He nodded. "You hear my voice, don't you?" she inquired. Yes, he did. "Well, then," she said, in triumph. "Why go around questioning?"

"Well," said the captain. "It's simply that we never thought we'd find a thing like this on Mars."

"And now you've found it, I dare say there's lots on every planet that'll show you God's infinite ways."

"Is this Heaven?" asked Hinkston.

"Nonsense, no. It's a world and we get a second chance. Nobody told us why. But then nobody told us why we were on Earth, either. That *other* Earth, I mean. The one you came from. How do we know there wasn't *another* before *that* one?"

"A good question," said the captain.

Lustig kept smiling at his grandfolks. "Gosh, it's good to see you. Gosh, it's good."

The captain stood up and slapped his hand on his leg in an off-hand fashion. "We've got to be going. It's been nice. Thank you for the drinks."

"You'll be back, of course," said the grandfolks.

"What?" The captain's eyes were distant.

"You'll be back. For supper tonight, Albert and yourself, captain, and Mr. Hinkston?"

"We'll try to make it. Thank you. There's so much to be done. My men are waiting for me, back at the—"

He stopped. He turned and looked toward the door, startled.

Far away, in the sunlight, there was a sound of voices, a crowd, a shouting and a great hello.

"What's that?" asked Hinkston.

"We'll soon find out!" And Captain John Black was out the front door abruptly, jolting across the green lawn and into the street of the Martian town.

He stood looking at the ship. The ports were open and his crew was streaming out, waving their hands. A crowd of people had gathered and in and through and among these people the members of the crew were running, talking, laughing, shaking hands. People did little dances. People swarmed. The rocket lay empty and abandoned.

A brass band exploded in the sunlight, flinging off a gay tune from upraised tubas and trumpets. There was a bang of drums and a shrill of fifes. Little girls with golden hair jumped up and down. Little boys shouted, "Hooray!" And fat men passed around ten cent cigars. The mayor of the town made a speech. Then, each member of the crew with a mother on one arm, a father or sister on the other, was spirited off down the street, into little cottages or big mansions and doors slammed shut.

The wind rose in the clear spring sky and all was silent. The brass band had banged off around a corner leaving the rocket to shine and dazzle alone in the sunlight.

"Abandoned," cried the captain. "Abandoned the ship, they did! I'll have their skins, by God! Their skins! They had orders!"

"Sir," said Lustig. "Don't be too hard on them. Those were all old relatives and friends."

"That's no excuse!"

"Think how they felt, captain, seeing familiar faces outside the ship!"

"They had their orders, damn it!"

"But how would you have felt, captain?"

"I would have obeyed orders! I would have—" The captain's mouth remained open.



STRIDING along the sidewalk under the Martian sun, tall, smiling, eyes blue, face tan, came a young man of some twenty-six years.

"John!" the man cried, and broke into a run.

"What?" said Captain John Black. He swayed.

"John, you old beggar you!"

The man ran up and gripped his hand and slapped him on the back.

"It's you," said John Black.

"Of course, who'd you think it was?"

"Edward!" The captain appealed now to Lustig and Hinkston, holding the stranger's hand. "This is my brother Edward. Ed, meet my men, Lustig, Hinkston! My brother!"

They tugged at each other's hands and arms and then finally embraced. "Ed!" "John, you old bum, you!" "You're looking fine, Ed, but, Ed what is this? You haven't changed over the years, you died I remember, when you were twenty-six, and I was nineteen, oh God, so many years ago, and here you are, and, Lord, what goes on, what goes on?"

Edward Black gave him a brotherly knock on the chin. "Mom's waiting," he said.

"Mom?"

"And Dad, too."

"And Dad?" The captain almost fell to earth as if hit upon the chest with a mighty weapon. He walked stiffly and awkwardly, out of coordination. He stuttered and whispered and talked only one or two words at a time. "Mom alive? Dad? Where?"

"At the old house on Oak Knoll Avenue."

"The old house." The captain stared in delighted amaze. "Did you hear that, Lustig, Hinkston? Oak Knoll. Old, old house. Mom. Dad. Lord!"

"I know it's hard for you to believe."

"But alive. Real."

"Don't I feel real?" The strong arm, the firm grip, the white smile. The light, curling hair.

Hinkston was gone. He had seen his own house down the street and was running for it. Lustig was grinning. "Now you understand, sir, what happened to everybody on the ship. They couldn't help themselves."

"Yes. Yes," said the captain, eyes shut. "Yes." He put out his hand. "When I open my eyes, you'll be gone." He opened his eyes. "You're still here. God, Edward, you look fine!"

"Come along, lunch is waiting for you. I told Mom."

Lustig said, "Sir, I'll be with my grand-folks if you want me."

"What? Oh, fine, Lustig. Later, then."

Edward grabbed his arm and marched him. "You need support."

"I do. My knees, all funny. My stomach, loose. God."

"There's the house. Remember it?"

"Remember it? Hell! I bet I can beat you to the front porch!"

They ran. The wind roared over Captain John Black's ears. The earth roared under his feet. He saw the golden figure of Edward Black pull ahead of him in the amazing dream of reality. He saw the house rush forward, the door open, the screen swing back. "Beat you!" cried Edward, bounding up the steps. "I'm an old man," panted the captain, "and you're still young. But, then, you *always* beat me, I remember!"

In the door way. Mom, pink and plump and bright. And behind her, pepper grey, Dad, with his pipe in his hand.

"Mom, Dad!"

He ran up the steps like a kid, to meet them.

IT WAS a fine long afternoon. They finished lunch and they sat in the living room and he told them all about his rocket and his being captain and they nodded

and smiled upon him and Mother was just the same, and Dad bit the end off a cigar and lighted it up in his old fashion. Mom brought in some iced tea in the middle of the afternoon. Then, there was a big turkey dinner at night and time flowing on. When the drumsticks were sucked clean and lay brittle upon the plates, the captain leaned back in his chair and exhaled his deep contentment. Dad poured him a small glass of dry sherry. It was seven-thirty in the evening. Night was in all the trees and coloring the sky, and the lamps were balos of dim light in the gentle house. From all the other houses down the streets came sounds of music, pianos playing, laughter.

Mom put a record on the victrola and she and Captain John Black had a dance. She was wearing the same perfume he remembered from the summer when she and Dad had been killed in the train accident. She was very real in his arms as they danced lightly to the music. He was so very happy that he wanted to cry. "It's not every day," she said, "that you get a second chance to live," she said.

"I'll wake in the morning," said the captain. "And I'll be in my rocket in space, and all this will be gone."

"No, no, don't think that," she cried, softly, pleadingly. "We're here. Don't question. God is good to us. Let's be happy."

"Sorry, Mom."

The record ended with a circular hissing. "You're tired, son," said Dad. He waved his pipe. "You and Ed go on upstairs. Your old bedroom is waiting for you."

"The old one?"

"The brass bed and all," laughed Edward.

"But I should report my men in?"

"Why?" Mother was logical.

"Why? Well, I don't know. No reason, I guess. No, none at all. What's the difference?" He shook his head. "I'm not being very logical these days."

"Good night, son." She kissed his cheek.

"Night, mom."

"Sleep tight, son." Dad shook his hand.

"Same to you, pop."

"It's good to have you home."

"It's good to be home."

He left the land of cigar smoke and perfume and books and gentle light and

ascended the stairs, talking, talking, with Edward. Edward pushed a door open and there was the yellow brass bed and the old semaphore banners from college days and a very musty racoon coat which he petted with strange, muted affection. "It's too much," he said, faintly. "Like an assault. Like being in a thunder shower without an umbrella. I'm soaked to the skin with emotion. It's like someone shot me with a load of buckshot. I'm perforated. I'm numb. I'm tired."

"A night's sleep between cool clean sheets for you, my bucko." Edward slapped wide the snowy linens and flounced the pillows. Then he put up a window and let the night blooming jasmine float in. There was moonlight and the sound of distant dancing and whispering.

"So this is Mars," said the captain, undressing.

"So this is Mars." Edward undressed in idle, leisurely moves, drawing his shirt off over his head, revealing golden shoulders and the good muscular neck.

The lights were out, they were into bed, side by side, as in the days, how many decades ago? The captain lolled and was nourished by the night wind pushing the lace curtains out upon the dark room air. Among the trees, upon a lawn, someone had cranked up a portable phonograph and now it was playing, softly, "I'll be loving you, always, with a love that's true, always."

The thought of Anna came to his mind. "Is Anna here?"

His brother, lying straight out in the moonlight from the window, waited and then said, "Yes. She's out of town. But she'll be here in the morning."

The captain shut his eyes. "I want to see Anna very much."

The room was square and quiet except for their breathing. "Good night, Ed."

A pause. "Good night, John."

He lay peacefully, letting his thoughts float. For the first time the stress of the day was moved aside, all of the excitement was calmed. He could think logically now. It had all been emotion. The bands playing, the sight of familiar faces, the sick pounding of your heart. But—now . . .

How? He thought. How was all this made? And why? For what purpose? Out



of the goodness of some kind God? Was God, then, really that fine and thoughtful of his children? How and why and what for?

He thought of the various theories advanced in the first heat of the afternoon by Hinkston and Lustig. He let all kinds of new theories drop in lazy pebbles down through his mind, as through a dark water, now, turning, throwing out dull flashes of white light. Mars. Earth. Mom. Dad. Edward. Mars. Martians.

Who had lived here a thousand years ago on Mars? Martians? Or had this always been like this? Martians. He repeated the word quietly, inwardly.

He laughed out loud, almost. He had the most ridiculous theory, all of a sudden. It gave him a kind of a chilled feeling. It was really nothing to think of, of course. Highly improbable. Silly. Forget it. Ridiculous.

PUT, he thought, just suppose. Just suppose, now, that there were Martians living on Mars and they saw our ship coming and saw us inside our ship and hated us. Suppose, now, just for the hell of it, that they wanted to destroy us, as invaders, as unwanted ones, and they wanted to do it in a very clever way, so that we would be taken off guard. Well, what would the best weapon be that a Martian could use against Earthmen with atom weapons?

The answer was interesting. Telepathy, hypnosis, memory and imagination.

Suppose all these houses weren't real at all, this bed not real, but only figments of my own imagination, given substance by

telepathy and hypnosis by the Martians.

Suppose these houses are really some other shape, a Martian shape, but, by playing on my desires and wants, these Martians have made this seem like my old home town, my old house, to lull me out of my suspicions? What better way to fool a man, by his own emotions. Using his own mother and father as bait.

And suppose those two people in the next room, asleep, are not my mother and father at all. But two Martians, incredibly brilliant, with the ability to keep me under this dreaming hypnosis all of the time?

And that brass band, today? What a fiendishly clever plan it would be. First, fool Lustig, then fool Hinkston, then gather a crowd around the rocket ship and wave. And all the men in the ship, seeing mothers, aunts, uncles, sweethearts dead ten, twenty years ago, naturally, disregarding orders, would rush out and abandon the ship. What more natural? What more unsuspecting? What more simple? A man doesn't ask too many questions when his mother is suddenly brought back to life; he's much too happy. And the brass band played and everybody was taken off to private homes. And here we all are, tonight, in various houses, in various beds, with no weapons to protect us, and the rocket lies in the moonlight, empty. And wouldn't it be horrible and terrifying to discover that all of this was part of some great clever plan by the Martians to divide and conquer us, and kill us. Some time during the night, perhaps, my brother here on this bed, will change form, melt, shift, and become a one-eyed, green and yellow-toothed Martian. It would be very simple for him just to turn over in bed and put a knife into my heart. And in all those other houses down the street, a dozen other brothers or fathers suddenly melting away and taking out knives and doing things to the unsuspecting, sleeping men of Earth.

His hands were shaking under the covers. His body was cold. Suddenly it was not a theory. Suddenly he was very afraid. He lifted himself in bed and listened. The night was very quiet. The music had stopped. The wind had died. His brother (?) lay sleeping beside him.

Very carefully he lifted the sheets, rolled them back. He slipped from bed and was walking softly across the room when his brother's voice said, "Where are you going?"

"What?"

His brother's voice was quite cold. "I said, where do you think you're going?"

"For a drink of water."

"But you're not thirsty."

"Yes, yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

Captain John Black broke and ran across the room. He screamed. He screamed twice.

He never reached the door.

IN THE MORNING, the brass band played a mournful dirge. From every house in the street came little solemn processions bearing long boxes and along the sun-filled street, weeping and changing, came the grandmas and grandfathers and mothers and sisters and brothers, walking to the churchyard, where there were open holes dug freshly and new tombstones installed. Seventeen holes in all, and seventeen tombstones. Three of the tombstones said, CAPTAIN JOHN BLACK, ALBERT LUSTIG, and SAMUEL HINKSTON.

The mayor made a little sad speech, his face sometimes looking like the mayor, sometimes looking like something else.

Mother and father Black were there, with brother Edward, and they cried, their faces melting now from a familiar face into something else.

Grandpa and Grandma Lustig were there, weeping, their faces also shifting like wax, shivering as a thing does in waves of heat on a summer day.

The coffins were lowered. Somebody murmured about "the unexpected and sudden deaths of seventeen fine men during the night—"

Earth was shoveled in on the coffin tops.

After the funeral the brass band slammed and banged back into town and the crowd stood around and waved and shouted as the rocket was torn to pieces and strewn about and blown up.

Preview of Peril

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Nobody knew into what awful dimension the Manuschen Drive would hurl that first test-ship—nobody but Martin Wayne. And he found out too late—or was it too soon?



Her back blast nearly got me.

SO THEY ASKED ME TO WRITE your epitaph, darling. They didn't call it that, of course—they called it a valediction. Just a last tribute from the man who should have gone—but didn't—to one of those who did go. And I don't know how they found out that there had ever been anything between us—perhaps Helen talked. She knew in the end. She had to know.

Anyhow—you're News. Not for the first time. But for the last time. And in a very

few years' people will vaguely wonder whatever became of that charming Jane Tarrant who used to speak over the interplanetary network, and your memory will fade like that of all the others who were lost in *Argo*—Captain Barr, Wilkes, "Happy" Farson, Kent, the physicist, and the biologist, Muriel Bennett.

Your memory will fade, my dear, in everybody's brain but mine. That is—if I am here to remember you. But I hope that I shan't be.

Memory...

I can shut my eyes now and see, with sharp edged clarity, the scene of our first meeting. It was in the yard where *Argo* was taking shape. And you were such a little figure among the cranes and machinery, the great hull sections. And the workmen to whom you chatted were giants beside you—and so was Captain Barr when he hurried over to challenge you, to demand bow, and by whose authority, you had got into the yard. They hadn't told us that we were taking a journalist along—but when you told us who and what you were your voice was sufficient identification.

What was it that they always used to call you? *The girl with the golden voice*. And you used to hate it, didn't you, and say that it was all too corny for words. Corny it may have been—but it was true. And I am sure that all those who listened to you over the network never noticed that your face wasn't beautiful, wasn't even conventionally pretty. But you always had charm, my dear—and your voice was never any more—or less—than a projection of that charm.

And you looked absurdly schoolgirlish, standing there among the big men and the big machines, when Barr called us all over to be introduced. And I remember that your hair was braided somehow and brought up over the top of your head, and that it should have been dark brown, but was bleached a little by the sun, and that your eyes were grey.

I'd never noticed all these details on the many occasions that I'd tuned in to your transmissions. I suppose that, like everybody else, I was too busy listening to your voice. But I noticed them now. And I told myself that I'd watch out for them when you made your next broadcast.

WHEN we shook hands we must have held hands for rather a long time. Suddenly I became aware that Captain Barr was looking at us, hard, and that a little half smile was beginning to flicker over his broad face. And that Wilkes, the Navigator, was standing beside us, hand half out, waiting to be introduced. His too handsome face, sullen under the thick, fair hair, was more sullen than usual. He was starting to make impatient noises.

So I let go of your hand—and it was a hard thing to do. Do you remember, darling? No. You can't, of course. And yet... But I wish I knew. I wish I knew for certain. In some ways it would be bad, much worse than it is now, and in some ways it would be better. It would be a clean break.

So I let go your hand—and it seemed that we both broke the contact very reluctantly. There was something there. *Something*. And we both felt it. But there wasn't anything we could do about it then. We had to let Barr get on with his introductions, we had to let Wilkes take you in hand and show you his half-understood—although he would never admit it—toy, the Mannschen Drive Unit, that complexity of tubes and coils and little, spinning wheels, more than half assembled, almost ready to be hoisted into its place inside the spidery framework that was yet to be clothed with gleaming plating.

And I could see, as Wilkes launched out into recently acquired technicalities, that you didn't believe it. None of us believed it—not even Wilkes himself. A trip to Alpha Centauri in little more than a month was one of the things that make entertaining fantasy fiction but have no place in the workaday world. But, as we had all been told, the main object of the expedition wasn't so much to reach Far Centaurus as to test the Drive. Something had to happen when it was switched on, but no one yet knew what.

You lunched with us all then.

The little restaurant in which the yard technicians, and such space officers who were taking a general interest in the construction of new tonnage, had never seemed exceptionally cheerful, had never offered any inducement to those feeding there to linger over their meals. But this day there was a subtle, hard to define, atmosphere about the place, a certain glamour. Everybody felt it. But I felt it more than the others. Because I was sitting next to you.

And it was after lunch that Captain Barr told me that I wasn't required, that such parts of the ship as concerned me, as Pilot, would not be fitted for another two weeks. I have often wondered what use he thought that I would make of the unexpected

leave. Did he, I wonder, assume that I should fly back to London, to Helen? Or had he seen the fire that was beginning to blaze up between us?

But I think that, even if you had not been there, I should have been granted liberty. It had been obvious for some few days that I was the fifth wheel to the coach, that I was just getting in everybody's way. And Barr knew, of course, that Helen, unlike the other wives, had not come to Port Kingsford. She liked neither Australia nor Australians—and she hated the stars and the ships that sail out to the stars. She was always jealous, was Helen, of any rival, and deep space was one rival that she could never hope to fight.

You left the yard with me. I asked if you had any plans, and you said no. And when you got in beside me, into the passenger seat of my Spurling Two, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. And so did the pressure of your body against mine as the acceleration pushed us together. It was exhilaratingly fresh—and, at the same time, was as though we had known each other for years. No words were necessary.

NEITHER of us spoke until we were over Sydney, two hours' flying time from Port Kingsford. We looked down at the city and the harbour—like some beautiful, brilliant miniature it was, bright and distinct in the late afternoon sunlight—and I said that it was no more than an irregularly shaped aquamarine on vari-coloured velvet, green for the grass and trees, red and white for the buildings. And you looked for and pointed out the ruins of the bridge, said that they were the most effective memorial to the Atomic War that you had ever seen. And I wanted to set her down there and then—already, darling, I was eager to gratify your slightest wish—so that you could see your war memorial properly, but you said no, push on.

And then we were over the Tasman Sea, and the inevitable depression. But we were too high for it to worry us—and as we looked down at the boiling, swirling clouds, lit by the brief unsteady effulgence of the lightning, I thought that Man was not truly Man until the Mastery of the Air, the Conquest of Space. And you made a rude noise and you said that you would

have to take me in hand, and that it was obvious to anybody that Man was not Man when surrounded by dirty great bunks of machinery; that, in those circumstances, he was no more than a cheap, organic brain for the machines.

And so we argued until the lights of Auckland, strung out around the harbour like a diamond necklace too wide and too brilliant to be in the best of taste, were beneath us. And there was the swinging of our turret drive to brake the forward speed, the easing down on the jets, the slow climb down the ladder of fire to the landing field. And we parked the Spurling at the Municipal Airport, and we hired a helicopter, and Jane Tarrant and Martin Wayne ceased to exist. Do you remember the dark glasses I got for you, darling? they were a poor disguise—but they seemed to serve. And I had to call Captain Barr to tell him where I was, to ask him to put Helen off with some convincing story if she should call Port Kingsford. It wasn't that I felt in any way ashamed, or that we were doing wrong—but I didn't want her hurt unnecessarily. There are certain loyalties—but you have no need to be told that.

Damn your loyalties!

I'm sorry, darling. You wouldn't be what you are if it weren't for the things that you hold important. A certain integrity, a code to which you must adhere, come Hell or high water. But in that fortnight we had together there was no thought of such matters—only the frank and unashamed enjoyment of each other, of the pleasant places in which we found ourselves. There was sailing in the Bay of Islands, there was the time that we climbed to the summit of Taranaki and got as much kick out of it as we would have done had it been Everest, the winter sports among the Southern Alps.

And there was that funny little hotel at Rotorua—do you remember?—where we tuned in the set in our bedroom, and got a recording of your broadcast covering the Cloud Country flood of a year ago. And I kidded you about your little closing down piece — *Goodbye Earth, goodbye Venus, goodbye Mars*—and said that with all that feeling in your voice you sounded as though you wanted all the male inhabitants of all three planets to come to bed

with you. And you said: *Why do you suppose I've taken a spaceman for a lover? It's the next best thing.* And you practised saying: *Goodbye Earth, goodbye Venus, goodbye Martin.* And we both laughed, because we knew that your next broadcast would be made from Port Kingsford, and the one after that from *Argo's* Control Room, and that I should be among those present on both occasions.

It was a marvellous two weeks, dear. We both of us knew that we should soon have to change all this for the austerities of shipboard existence. And we knew that the way we were heading must lead, sooner or later, to disaster. There was Helen to consider. And there was John, your husband. But we laughed and played in the sun as, unaccountably, Autumn trailed into Spring, as the days of our holiday sped all too fast. It was a curiously sweet blend, wasn't it? Eager adolescence and maturity, first love and tolerant experience. I'd never had anything like it before. And I shall never have anything like it again.

We spent our last night together in Auckland.

And in the morning a taxi came to take me to the Airport, and I climbed into the cockpit of the Spurling and, in spite of the fact that I had just said goodbye to you, I felt quite happy. It was goodbye—but it was also an revoir. I should be seeing you again. Whatever the future might have in store for us—it would not be separation.

The run from Auckland to Port Kingsford was without interest. I let my mind stray, relived all the events of the past two weeks. And so it was that I almost overshot the mark. Almost? The Port Kingsford beacon was astern of me when I turned the Spurling in a great arc, came in for a landing. And the fact that I had so signally demonstrated my inefficiency as a navigator made me determined to prove my prowess as a pilot. You've seen others do it, of course. They come in on blazing jets and then, just before they hit the ground, swing the turret and come in to a spectacular landing.

That's what I did. But the turret wouldn't swing. They never found out what was wrong with it—there wasn't enough left of the Spurling. And I did the only thing that I could do. I cut the

drive, tried to lift her on the ailerons. It saved my life. But when they picked up the pieces of the wreckage there were some who doubted whether it was worthwhile.

AND SO they flew me back to Auckland. Sir Michael Sanderson was there, Head Surgeon at the hospital. And he patched me up until I was almost as good as new. Almost. There were one or two little items that weren't in the original specifications when I was built—a silver plate in the skull, one short leg and a permanent limp. But they kept telling me that I was lucky to be alive and in such fine shape, and I believed them—then—and was duly grateful to Sir Michael.

Helen was with me the whole time. She flew from London as soon as she heard of my accident. And she was very... comforting. She almost made me forget that I should not be sailing in *Argo*, that "Happy" Farson would be taking my place. But she couldn't make me forget you. She must have guessed, even then, how things were with us. And she was very careful never to leave us together. And the contrast between her tall, blond beauty and your tiny, brunette loveliness was so ludicrous that it hurt. And I wanted to tell her then that you and I were more than friends—but I hadn't the guts. And I loved her, too—I still do—but not in the same way that I love you.

We were alone just once.

It was shortly after I had been able to get up, to put on a dressing gown and hobble around the apartment that Helen had taken for us. She had gone into town to do some shopping. And you came round to say goodbye.

We didn't say much, did we? It was all too deep for words. And I wanted very much to beg you not to go, to plead with you to stay. But I had steelled myself for the inevitable parting and was possessed of a sort of perverse determination that it should take place on schedule. Yet I knew that, with a very few words, I could make you stay. And you knew that too. And I could feel you begging me not to say those words. You'd never have forgiven me if I had said them. You'd never have forgiven yourself. Never in your life had you backed out of an assignment...

Perhaps I would have said them.

But Helen came in when we were clasp- ing hands for the last time, and we started apart like a pair of guilty school kids, and our farewell, when it was said, was very stiff and formal. And then I was isolated, apart, wrapped in my own thoughts, and I didn't bear what Helen was saying when I went to the window and waited for the stratoliner to take off for Western Australia, for Port Kingsford, for the inter- planetary terminus and for the first of the interstellar ships.

I saw her go, her jets drawing a long line of fire against the evening sky. And I thought of you, sitting there among the other passengers, and I thought of Port Kingsford and the big ships, the Lunar Ferry and the Martian Mail, and the liners of the Venusian service with the sleek streamlining of their hulls marred by the excrescences that were their infra-red projectors.

And *Argo* would be there, standing a little apart from the others, not belonging in the company of those that only made pitifully short hops between the inhabited worlds of a system. And Captain Barr would be there, and the unstable, erratically brilliant Wilkes, the gloomy Parson, Kent, who had studied under Mannschen, and Bennett.

When I turned back into the room Helen was curled up on the divan. She raised her face to me as I limped towards her. It was drawn and strained, miserable.

"So she's gone," she said. "And you're sorry, aren't you?"

"Yes." And then I lied to her. I had to. I didn't want to see her hurt. "She's nothing. She's no more than the others. But I had wanted to be one of the first men to Far Centaurus, to see worlds outside our own little system..."

"And I'm glad you haven't gone. They won't come back. You wouldn't have come back. The whole thing is too impossible, too fantastic..."

"They'll come back—but I shan't have been with them..."

AND I went to her, and I let her comfort me, and she said that I was just an overgrown child crying for the moon. And all the time that she was pressing my head to her breast, was smoothing my hair, my thoughts were far away. They were

with the westbound stratoliner, they were pulling me towards Port Kingsford, they were with Barr and Wilkes, Kent and Parson and Bennett, with *Argo*. And, above all my darling, they were with you.

The next day was the day set for the blasting off, for the challenge to Far Centaurus. I must have been very hard to live with. I tried to stay in bed and tossed and twisted miserably. I tried drinking—but alcohol seemed only to put a savage edge on my dismal sobriety. And I got up and prowled around the parment, and tinkered with the radio, and got every bulletin I could concerning *Argo*. I must have missed several thanks to my inability to stay on one wave band...

And I toyed with the idea of borrowing Helen's Spurling, of making the hop to Port Kingsford. But I had made up my mind long since that, even if I should be sufficiently fit, I would not see you go. To have seen you climbing towards the stars, out of reach, would have been pure masochism. And now I think that not to have seen the last of you was an even greater refinement of self-torture...

And I kept looking at the clock, and Helen kept looking at me, and there was a little, wistful smile on her pale face—and some of it was pity, and some was the hurt amusement of a mother watching the antics of a beloved but incomprehensible child, and the rest of it was just a gallant attempt to hide her own misery.

At last the clock on the wall said 1745. *Argo* was due to blast off at 1800. And your last broadcast from Earth was scheduled for 1748.

I went to the radio. I tuned in to the wave band of the station at Port Kingsford. The air was dead. All sorts of doubts and fears chased each other through my mind, and I spun the dials desperately, aimlessly, and Helen said, in a resigned sort of voice, "I suppose you realize that New Zealand is three hours east of Westralia..."

And as she spoke the screen lit up, and we heard your voice. I never thought to take note of the wave length—but it was away up in the super high frequencies, the experimental bands. And we were looking into what could only be the Control Room of *Argo*. And you were there, sitting in front of the scanner, and your

face was white and strained, and there was a desperation in your eyes that I hated to see—and there was a certain elation.

Behind you the scene was blurred, indistinct, out of focus. And over all was a curious red glow, and all colours seemed to change, to shift, and the perspective was... queer.

But Wilkes was there behind you, and Muriel Bennett. And she was sitting in one of the chairs, and Wilkes was kneeling beside her, and she was pressing his head to her breast and she was stroking his thick, fair hair. And she was frightened—but in mothering Wilkes she was forgetting her own fears.

At first I didn't hear what you were saying. The sound of your voice was enough. But it was obvious that something was wrong—very badly wrong. And you said—

"...the temporal precession. That's what Kent told me to tell you. The precession control isn't rugged enough, won't stand up to the temporal stresses. It will have to be improved. The Mannschen Drive is impracticable unless its tendency to shift time forward can be controlled..."

"It can't be controlled!" shouted Wilkes. He raised a tear-stained face from the soft woman-flesh to which he had fled in this moment of crisis, a face no longer sullen, a face on which there was no longer any room for any emotion save that of panic fear. "*It can't be controlled!*"

And you ignored him, and Muriel Bennett pulled his head down to her breast again, and I thought I heard her whisper—"Hush. Hush, my darling..." And the angles behind you shifted and stirred, and the colours sagged down the spectrum, and the perspective was all wrong so that Bennett and Wilkes loomed behind you like giants.

I SAW YOU lick your lips. It was a furtive little gesture. You didn't want the worlds to know that you were as frightened as the others. But why, my darling? You were frightened—no sane person could have been otherwise—and yet you carried on with your duties as long as it was possible for you to do so.

"This is Jane Tarrant," you said slowly. "This is Jane Tarrant, signing off for

the last time. I am saying goodbye for Captain Barr, for James Kent, for Douglas Farson. They are down in the Mannschen Drive Room, trying to get the unit under control. They never will—and they know it. But they are trying.

"Farson is gone. He got caught in the field of the thing. I don't know what happened to him—perhaps Kent could explain. But what should have been inside was outside, and what should have been outside was inside. It was horrible. And he didn't die at once—not until Captain Barr beat in his head with a wrench..."

And behind you the angles stirred and shifted crazily, the colours flickered, and the perspective suddenly made Bennett and Wilkes no larger than pygmies. And you looked back at some horror that I couldn't see, that was outside the range of the scanner. And when you turned your face to the screen again it was obvious that the last, faint hope had gone.

"This is Jane Tarrant signing off," you said slowly and softly. "This is Jane Tarrant signing off for the last time. Goodbye, Earth! Goodbye, Venus..." And you paused. And it seemed that you were looking straight at me over unguessable gulfs of Space and Time. "Goodbye, Ma..."

And before you could finish the screen went black, and there was a crash of static, and an almost supersonic whine. And the lights came on again, and I bent forward eagerly to catch your last words. But there weren't any last words. The same scene was played again—but backwards. And when it came to the end—or the beginning—there was darkness and silence, and nothing any more from you.

I don't know how long I was hunched over the controls, twisting dials, trying in vain to conjure up your ghost from the insubstantial ether. But during my vain efforts I got on to the Port Kingsford wavelength, and the screen showed a picture of the landing field, and the newscaster said that he would be showing us the preliminaries to *Argo's* sailing.

She hadn't gone yet.

You hadn't gone yet.

It was always a paradoxical affair, the Mannschen Drive, and what I had just heard and seen had been one of its paradoxes.

There was time.

There was still time.

And when Helen stopped me I had thrown my uniform on over my pajamas, was rushing out to the roof garage and the waiting helicopter.

She was sweetly reasonable. She was all commonsense. And she pointed out that I was in no fit state to fly to Westralia, that it would take all of three hours to reach Port Kingsford, and that it was only two hours before *Argo's* departure. And radio waves fly faster than a Spurling, she said, and so we both of us tried to get in touch with the ship. And at last we got through on the telephone. It was a stranger who answered. He wore the uniform of a Deputy Port Captain, but I had never seen him before—and it was obvious that he had never seen me before. I told him who I was, that he would have to stop *Argo* from sailing at all costs. He refused to believe me. He refused to call Barr or Wilkes, or Farson or Kent or Bennett, to the scanner. He refused to call you—and flatly refused even to deliver a message.

"Listen, Joe," he growled, "I've been all day on this kind of thing. Every crackpot, every fanatic, thinks he has a divine mission to stop the ship from sailing."

"But I'm Martin Wayne," I told him with a dreadfully urgent patience.

"Yeah? So's you an' about seventeen others!"

And the screen went blank and the speaker went dead, and when we tried to get through again the exchange told us that there was a top priority list almost a mile long...

HELEN tried to stop me when I went out. I struck her, I think, but I can't remember. And I took the helicopter to the Municipal Airport, and cursed the slowness of the whirling vanes, and was briefly thankful when I got there that I had remembered, somehow, to pick up the key of the private hangar. And I got Helen's Spurling out, and I know a trick or two with a Spurling's drive, and I was over the Blue Mountain's, west of Sydney, while my eyes were still smarting from the floodlights of the Auckland field.

Argo was still grounded when the space-

port came up over the rim of the desert horizon. Somebody had turned searchlights on her—and outside the circle of blinding light the sand was black with people.

I have often wondered if you, there in *Argo's* control, saw me coming in like a bat out of Hell, and if you allowed yourself to dream, briefly and fantastically, that it might be me. And did Barr see me—and did he decide that his sailing had already been too much delayed, that the safety of some fool in a hurry was of no importance?

I came in to a flaming landing, my forward-swung jets lancing the sand, in a cloud of fire and smoke. And before I had touched down *Argo* lifted, and the back blast of her interplanetary drive took the Spurling, and lifted her gently, and tipped her over on to the crumpled wreckage of her port wing. I was not hurt, and I scrambled out, and the spaceport police came running up and seized me roughly, and as they hustled me over to the Administration Building I looked up and saw that already *Argo* was no more than a light in the sky, more distant and more unattainable than the low, bright stars of the Cross.

I told them my story. I think that, in the end, I half convinced them. But it was too late. You had already switched over to the interstellar drive, you were outrunning the signals from all Earth's stations.

ALL THAT was two years ago. Your signal has come in again, on the proper wave band, and they think that it must have been made when you were half way to Alpha Centauri. And they all know now that you are gone, and that the others are gone, and that the ship is gone. And they asked me to write your epitaph for them—a valediction they called it. And I shall write it, I suppose. This isn't it. This is for you alone. The one that they get will be trite and commonplace, full of the dear old guff about men against the stars.

And there's another thing that has always worried me a little. When you signed off for the last time—should it have been "Mara," or "Martin"? I'd like to know. Either way I'd love you. Either you did your job, lived up to your code, to the very last. . . .



Illustrated by DONEL

Against the Stone Beasts

By JAMES BLISH

THE LETTERS ON THE FLY-specked glass were simple, almost dogmatic. Anderson eyed them with some amusement. Art agents seldom have any taste, he thought; can't afford to.

The sign repeated, *Special Showing of Surrealist Paintings*, and declined to offer further information. Anderson started to walk on, then hovered indecisively. Modern arts of all kinds were his province in preparation for a doctorate thesis. It wouldn't do to let the smallest example go by without inspection. He went in.

The improvised gallery was musty with the odor of departed vegetables, and very cold. Like the sign, the show had been set up with a braggart simplicity. No pro-

grams, no furniture, no eager guides—there were not even any guards. Anderson wondered what was to stop a thief from stooping under the heavy rayon rope, which kept the frames out of reach of curious or greedy fingers, and making off with the whole collection.

With his first look at the paintings themselves, Anderson was blessing his good daemon fervently for having guided his footsteps. He could not place the works in any specific category; they certainly were not surrealist, unless the word had been used in its original meaning of "super-realistic." The artist had used fantasy for his sources, true enough, but the results were not the usual shapelessness.



Wings battered him, and Ate's club thudded against his ribs.

Down the time-track tumbled Andreson, to land in a continuum of ghastly matter-and-space reversal—and find a love that shattered the very laws of life!

He angled his long body over the rope and inspected the nearest one. It was a huge canvas, reaching almost to the floor, and it depicted a building or similar structure like a glistening glass rod, rising from a forest of lesser rods toward a red sun of almost tangible hotness. A single figure, man-like, but borne aloft on taut, delicate wings which suggested a bat rather than a human, floated over the nearest of the towers. A quick glance revealed that all the paintings but one contained several of these shapes; the one exception was a field of stars with a torpedo streaking across it.

His quick glance confirmed another suspicion. The scenes were in deliberate order, as if attempting a pictorial history of the flying people. He felt vaguely disap-

pointed. This stuff was garden-variety fantasy, verging on the conceptions of science-fiction. Still, there was a magnificent technique behind it all—a blending and effacing of brush-strokes which made the Dutch look like billboard-splashes, and a mastery of glaze which made each scene glow like an illuminated transparency.

This last painting by the door, for instance. It showed the translucent city again, with approximately the same details—but with a barely-perceptible dimming of the red sunlight, a single tower jaggedly shattered, a few other tiny touches, the artist had given it an atmosphere of almost unbearable desolation. It was the same fabulous metropolis—but it was tragic, deserted, lost. Peering hopelessly from the

summit of the broken tower was a tiny face, looking directly upward at Anderson.

He allowed himself an appreciative shudder, and methodically went around the gallery, following the history the pictures built up. It seemed commonplace enough: a race of space-travellers who had colonized the Earth, perhaps some time in the dim past, had built a civilization, and had finally succumbed to some undepicted doom. What was amazing was the utterly convincing way the well-worn story was told. It was real—super-real, indeed, for it commanded more belief and sympathy than the everyday human tragedies.

Anderson took out his fountain pen and an unopened letter and walked toward the door. He must get the address of this place and attempt to locate the artist. John Kimball's inscription on the envelope reminded him that Johnny, though a scientist, dabbled in the arts and would be interested. He ripped open the flap, then stopped in mid-stride, ducked under the rayon cord to look at the spaceship scene.

In many ways this was the most wonderful of the lot. Even a night sky or a telescope field has no depth; it is merely a black surface containing spots of light; but the picture surpassed nature. It had a stereoscopic quality, all the more startling because it was impossible to ascertain how it was done. Anderson noted with a chuckle that the agent had placed the paintings in such order that there was a strong draft blowing toward the picture, as if being drained away into that awesome vacuum. A strictly phony trick, but clever nonetheless. Curious in spite of his better instincts, he put out a tentative finger to the surface of the scene—

The fountain pen clattered to the floor.

He gaped idiotically, and stirred with his finger at the nothingness where the picture still seemed to be. In his shock-numbed mind two words burned fiercely:

It's real.

Ridiculous. Tensely he forced himself to move his hand in deeper, against the yelling of his nerves. It struck a slight, tingling resistance, like a curtain of static electricity—and then the blood was pounding in each finger as it trying to burst through the skin. He snatched the hand back. There was a vacuum there; cut off from the room by some unseen force

through which the air was leaking rapidly.

Teetering on the edge of panic, he struggled to make better sense of the facts. The prickly pounding he had felt in his fingers might well have been electrical and only that, and Johnny Kimball had once demonstrated for him the "static jet" which might explain the draft of air. Three-dimensional television, perhaps—

He shook his head. No inventor would set up a demonstration like this, in an abandoned grocery, without any announcement or literature; nor would there be likely to be eighteen screens, each one showing a motionless and quite impossible scene. No; it was insane, but these garish things were—

Windows.

Into what? Clutching at his frayed emotions, he took a step toward the next frame. His foot crunched on the forgotten fountain pen. For a second he flailed in terror at nothing, and then pitched head foremost over the low ledge.

AFTER A MOMENT the sweet piping spoke again. "You are not hurt. The mental shock will pass shortly."

Anderson said nothing and stared fixedly at the crimson glow underneath his eyelids. Physically he was unhurt, but his sanity was precarious. In his mind, behind the closed lids, it happened over and over again: the long twisting fall, with the great city spinning and growing beneath him in a riot of color, and damp hot air gushing past him, the sudden swooping of the dark figure and the thrum of wings. He tried to pass out again and awaken on the floor of the gallery, but the cold, chiming voice jabbed him awake again.

"This is quite real. You are intelligent enough to accept it—stop thinking like an infant."

The motherly reprimand under such circumstances planted a small germ of amusement somewhere in his mind, and he grasped it frantically and began to laugh, still keeping his eyes clenched shut. Even without seeing its face, he could feel the creature's alarm at his hysteria, but he allowed the shaking to exhaust him into a sort of calmness. Only when his breathing had become controlled and even did he allow himself a second look.

Red sunlight played harshly in upon him

through the translucent walls of the small room, and burned sullenly within the crystal bar which crossed above his head. One wall was recessed with what seemed to be bookshelves, and odd articles of furniture stood here and there; but evidently none of them had been designed for humans, for he was lying on the smooth floor, his jacket bunched under his head. The cowed shape still arched over him with Satanic solicitude, black against the glare, and somehow smaller than he had expected it to be. He hoped that that cape would not expand into wings—not yet—for his new calm still stood at the shimmering verge of madness.

"Thank you," he said carefully. "I owe you my life."

The silhouetted head moved as if to dismiss the matter. "Your sudden appearance in mid-air was startling. We were fortunate that I happened to be in flight at the time."

With a whispering sound, like the rustling of heavy cloth, the figure moved out of the direct rays of the sun and settled gracefully against one of the furniture-like things. The light struck it full, and Andreson gasped and sat bolt upright.

She was winged, no doubt about that. But the bat-like impression those wings had given him seemed to have been only a product of distance. Seen in closeup, the wings were tawny and delicate, and traced with intricate veins, their ribs were close-set, the webbing like the sheerest silk. They rose from the girl's back where her shoulderblades should have been, and at rest curved around her sides and made a backdrop for her legs and feet.

Except for those gorgeous pinions, which set her off like two great Japanese fans, she might have been human, or close to it. She no more suggested the rodent than the goddess Diana would have suggested a female gorilla. The wings, something about the bony structure underlying her face, a vague *otherness* about her proportions—except for these minute differences she could have passed anywhere for a strikingly lovely human girl. Her clothing was brief and simple, and not weighted with ornaments, for she needed free limbs and no useless baggage for flight.

Andreson realized that he was goggling and rearranged his face as best he could.

She did not seem to take his amazed inspection as anything but normal, however. "Are you a time-traveller?" she asked, tilted her head curiously. "We could think of no other explanation. Are you from our track?"

"I don't know," Andreson confessed. "My trip was accidental, and the mechanism is a mystery to me." He considered asking about the gallery, but the girl's questions had already told him it would be fruitless.

He masked his emotions in the mechanism of locating and lighting a cigarette, while the girl waited with polite patience. It was hard to forget that there was an obscure doom prophesied—or had it been merely narrated, as historical fact?—for this exquisite creature and her whole civilization, and he was determined to say nothing about it until he knew what he was talking about.

"I discovered in my time a sort of gateway to your time, and to seventeen other nearly synchronous moments, set up by a scientist unknown to me. Each of the gates seems to open upon one single specific instant. For instance: before I fell into the one which brought me here, I saw a figure I'm sure was yours. And it was motionless above the city, all the time that I was watching it."

He broke off suddenly. "Wait a minute. If this is another time—well, suppose you tell me: am I speaking your language, or do you know mine? Or are you a telepath?"

SHE laughed, each sound a clear, musical tone, as if she had been struck by a desire to sing the *Bell Song*. "Don't you know your own language when you hear it? No, the Varese are not telepathic—few races are. But a truly telepathic race allied with us has provided our culture with a good stock of equipment for tapping various parts of the mind. We use it for education. We simply tapped your language centers while you were unconscious."

A shadow passed across the glowing wall, and he heard the already-familiar hum of wings. A moment later a newcomer was outlined in the sunlight in a low doorway which seemed to open on empty space. It was a man, this time, a figure almost exactly Andreson's height,

and perhaps a little older, though it was hard to judge. He smiled unpleasantly at the human, revealing two upper incisors which were slightly larger than the rest of his teeth, and demanded, "Well, what time is he?"

"What time are you?" Anderson countered. "We've no record of you in our history. You could have flourished, died, or moved on a dozen times without our knowing it—our records go back only three thousand years."

"Well taken," the Varan said, making himself comfortable on one of the odd "chairs." "We're not native, here, of course. But so far we've found no mammals on this planet, except a few egg-laying ones that aren't even entirely warm-blooded yet; so you must be a considerable distance in our future. Furthermore, you're a time-traveller, which means that you know more than we do, for time is a problem we have never broken."

The girl shook her head slowly, all traces of her former laughter vanished. "It's no use, Atel. He's here by accident, and isn't a scientist."

"What's the matter?" Anderson said. Both faces looked so somber that he nearly forgot his own problem. "Are you in trouble?"

"We're at war," the girl said softly. "And we shall probably be exterminated, all of us, before the year is over."

Anderson remembered again the picture of the deserted city, and despite the hot sun he felt the same chill.

"This planet you call Earth," Atel said, "has no life on its surface now with enough intelligence to count up to three. But after we had been here fifty-three of its years, we discovered that Earth has a civilization of its own all the same—*inside*."

A dozen legends chased through Anderson's mind at once. "Cave-dwellers of some sort? It hardly seems credible."

"No, not cave-dwellers. These aren't even solid, and they couldn't live in caves. They live in the Earth—in the rock itself, and all the way down to the core. They are—space-beasts. They move through solid matter just as you and I move through space, and are stopped by space as we are stopped by a solid wall. In the air, for instance, we're safe from them, for what is

to us a thin gas is for them a viscous, almost rigid medium. In the oceans, we meet on equal terms; but true solids are their natural medium."

"How did you discover them?"

"They discovered us," the girl said. "They have besieged the city ever since the fifty-third year after our landing. They're invisible, of course, but we can see them as openings in the earth. The openings change shape as they move, and of course no natural pit does that. In their own universe, the hollow Earth bounded by its solid atmosphere, they are flying creatures, and their sense of gravity is the reverse of ours."

Her clear, fluting voice became steadily duller, losing its inflection as the tale went on. "Before we came here," she said, "we had encountered what our scientists call counter-matter—matter of opposite electrical nature to ours. But this complete inversion of space-matter relationships was unknown to us. The space-beasts knew about it. They are bent on driving us from the Earth . . ."

ANDRESON felt his mind reeling into hysteria again. It was difficult enough to accept the spotless, shining glass chamber and the two winged Varese—but this story of an inside-out universe and its air-treading masters—if only John Kimball had been the one to hear it—

"Sometimes," Atel said reflectively, "I think the Varese have earned their defeat. There was a time when we were carrying the fight into the enemy's own cosmos. But it was their cosmos, not ours, and they knew it very well! Our change of state, while it enabled us to see our foes, could not change our mental orientation. We were lost in that hollow darkness. We could not forget that each great gulf was actually a mountain, the sudden chasms were buildings we ourselves had built,—and the things like tiny burrows which kept opening and closing all about our feet were the footfalls of our brothers. And the space-beasts swooped upon us, each of them with six tiers of wings muttering against the solid magma of the Earth, and our weapons were crude and worthless . . ."

Anderson's mind tasted the concept and rejected it with a shudder. "But surely,"

he said as steadily as he could, "you must have better weapons, now."

"Oh, yes, we have the weapons. But we are decadent, and have lost the initiative to be the aggressors. The machines that accomplished the reversal of state for our ancestors have lain idle for a century in the bowels of our city. We no longer understand them. We are dying, first of all, of old age—the space-beasts are the accident that speeds us along the way. Shall I tell you what we use against them now?"

The girl stirred protestingly. Andreson looked at her, but she would not return the glance. Atel went on relentlessly.

"Look." From under his tunic he produced a heavy, long metal rod.

"A club? But—I don't see how—"

"It's hollow," Atel said succinctly. "The metal, of course, is useless, but the vacuum inside is steel-hard to them. Space crushing into space, and gouts of hard radiation bursting like blood from the contact. That's all we have now, that and a feeble energising process which sometimes seals off the foundations of the city. Walls, and clubs! Our last miserable recourse—and then—"

"Then the space-beasts will own the Earth again."

II

BY THE TIME JOHN KIMBALL had finished disconnecting the leads to the multiple screen and rewiring the master converter he was nearly blind with fatigue and his fingertips jerked and danced uncontrollably on the verniers. The sleepless nights of the previous week, and the emotional strain under which he had been working throughout was taking its toll now. After the wave-splitting effect had first suggested it to him, he had spent most of the week erecting the demonstration, and quite probably the triumphant letter he had mailed to Andreson afterwards had been a little crazy.

As soon as he had posted the letter he had managed to get in about twenty hours of deathlike slumber. It was hardly enough, but there was no help for that now. Except for the first, sickening shock—for the discarded, empty envelope on the floor, the splintered fountain pen, and the one screen featureless and flickeringly gray, had told him what had happened in instant detail—

he had wasted no time cursing himself for his grandiose "gallery" stunt. The Colossus in the cellar would need many hours of weary, desperate work before the cauterized scars of Andreson's cannoning fall through the tissues of Time would open enough to permit Kimball to follow.

A tumbler clicked in the pre-dawn silence, and a flood of magnetons sped through the primary coils. The ensuing process was quiet and invisible, but Kimball could feel it—the familiar, nauseating strain which had first led him to the basic principle. It meant that tiny lacunae were being born in the fabric of Time, spreading and merging as the spinning magnetic field tore at them. He slumped on his stool and waited. He was not sure that the last hour's work had been even approximately right, but his gibbering nerves would no longer permit calculation or delicate mechanical correction. The die was cast, and wherever the nascent achronic gateway led, he would have to follow.

After a moment he discovered that the climbing dial needles were hypnotizing him. Getting up from the stool, he proceeded to collect his equipment, moving like a zombie. It was futile to wish he had studied the period more closely, but at least it was clear that the age of the winged colonists had been warfare; best to be armed, though there was a good chance that his pistol would be far outclassed. A flashlight elipped to his belt, and an alcohol compass tuned to the machine's field rather than the Earth's, and he was ready.

He stepped into the heavy torus coil which terminated the series—there had been no time to set up a new frame—and turned out the cellar light.

The machine made no sound, and in the blackness no one could have seen that after a few moments it was alone.

THE light of the red sun ran back and forth along the catwalk in quivering lines, and all around it the city glistened in faery-like beauty. Andreson regarded the bridge dubiously; it was little more than a thread of crystal.

"It will bear your weight," the girl said, mistaking his trepidation. Masking his thoughts, he set out across it.

"They have come through several times, just recently," Atel continued evenly. "In

a sort of borer—I suppose they thought of it as that—whose walls were invisible, its machinery a contorted group of vacancies in a solid interior. But we destroyed the solid part, and they were crushed. It is hard to imagine how empty space could crush. But we have the law that two objects may not exist in the same space at the same time, and this seems to be its converse."

Andreson tried it out: two spaces cannot exist in the same—in the same what? Abruptly his head was whirling and in the vast distance the earth reeled and shuddered; the glassy thread under his feet seemed to swivel back and forth like a tightrope. He was going over—

Behind him, powerful vanes cracked open, and lean hands grappled his shoulders firmly. "Thanks," he gasped, flailing with his feet at the landing of the next building. Atel grinned contemptuously and leaned him against the wall like a manikin. "Nevertheless," the winged man proceeded as imperturbably as ever, "they learn rapidly. If they ever find out the secret of reversing their condition, we can close the book on Varan history." He jerked open the door to which the platform led, and Andreson and the girl followed him through.

From the level upon which they were standing all the way up to the summit of this new tower there was a vast chamber, domed with a clear roof. Around the base of the dome proper a ledge or platform ran, upon which was more of the furniture-like stuff—evidently a sort of solarium. Extending outside the walls as well as inside, it gave the building the look of a giant in a plastic helmet. At the apex of the dome a gem, like a giant's diamond, was fixed, rotating slowly, catching the sunlight and sending a parade of rainbow hues over the seats banked far below.

"Starstone Chamber," the girl said. "Our council hall."

"It's beautiful. Not a place for stuffy-minded men, I'd say."

They walked down through the tiers of seats toward the bottom of the arena, where what appeared to be the head of a spiral staircase was visible.

"Where are we bound?"

"To Goseq, one of our senior psychologists," Atel said. "We want to see what

we can dredge up about the sciences of your period. Doubtless your observation, being untrained, missed most of the essentials, but there ought to be some kind of residuum in your subconscious."

"Why don't you fly me back to where I fell out of?" Andreson suggested stiffly. "I realize that you can't expect to remember the exact spot, but those 'windows' must look both ways, and should be findable. I could send you a more suitable specimen—a friend of mine who's a scientist—"

"We do know the exact spot," Atel interrupted. "We have detectors in operation at all times—naturally! But a thorough search of that area revealed nothing."

Andreson sighed. "I was afraid of that. The apparatus evidently wasn't intended to be used for an airplane; I suppose I blew it out."

The girl, who had been preceding them, stopped at the top of the stairwell and levelled a dainty finger at Atel. "Why don't you stop tormenting him because he's not a scientist?" she demanded angrily. "It isn't his fault! He's doing his best for us!"

Atel's eyebrows would have shot up, had he had any. "Certainly," he purred, with an ironical gesture. "I'm sure you understand my attitude, Mr. Andreson. As a non-scientist, you are more of a curiosity than a gift, and that is a disappointment to us. We shall try to make your stay here as comfortable—and as short—as possible."

Andreson, taken aback at the girl's sudden outburst, hardly knew what to say. He was spared the task of replying, however—

The sun went out!

THE GIRL gave a smothered little cry, and the human clumsily tried to make his way through the blackness toward where he had last seen her. A powerful four-fingered hand grasped his elbow roughly.

"Stand still," Atel growled. "Jima! It may be another attack. Wait for the tower lights."

Andreson was uncertain as to whether "Jima" was an expletive or the girl's name, which he had never heard before, but he stood still, resisting an impulse to

shake Atel off. After a moment an eerie sound drifted to his ears: a distant, musical keening.

"Ah. It is a raid—there's the alarm."

As he spoke, a dim radiance filtered down over them, bringing the ranked seats of the council chamber into ghostly relief. It was coming down from the dome, but the great jewel no longer scattered rainbows. The light did not seem to have any single source.

"Aloft with him," Atel ordered.

Reluctantly the girl gripped the Earthman's other arm, and two pairs of wings thrummed together in the echoing chamber. He felt himself arrowing dizzily skyward, and tried to hold his body stiff.

A second later they were standing on the high ledge among the deserted couches. Below them, the city, seen here from its highest tower, was presenting a heart stopping new facet of its beauty. Every one of the crystalline shafts were gleaming with blue-white flame along its entire length; though no single one was too bright to be looked at directly, their total effect was of a sea of light almost as brilliant as high noon. Tiny motes drifted back and forth across the pillars of radiance: Varans in flight, evidently going to their posts in answer to the alarm.

BUT when Anderson looked up to see what had happened to the sun, what he saw wiped the miracle of the city from his mind.

The sky had turned to rock. The whole metropolis was trapped in a tremendous hemisphere of some strange substance, a stony bowl, smooth and polished, and veined with dark red lines like bad marble. Here and there the glow of the city struck sullen fire against the lava-like surface.

When Atel finally spoke, his voice had none of its previous arrogance. "They have us now," he husked. "Our sky is granite to them—and they've destroyed cubic miles of it, instantaneously! Our power, our air . . . cut off!"

"They've worked a miracle," the girl said with unwilling respect. "The beasts are scientists—we knew that in the beginning. Don't you see, Atel? They'll use that dome to get above the city! And their borers, too—"

6—Planet—Fall

Indecisively Atel spread his wings half-way. "We can't carry this Earthman about the city now," he said. "Jina, go to your post. I'll take him back to my rooms."

"But—" Anderson and the girl protested simultaneously.

"Need I remind you that I command this sector during emergencies, by Council order?" the Varan snapped. "He'll be no safer with us than alone in the apartments. Take him down again."

Mutely Jina took the human's arm, and the two picked him up again—he was becoming a little tired of being catapulted through the air once every hour—and plunged back to the catwalk door.

"All right," the Varan told the girl, his voice edged with impatience. "You're needed elsewhere, Jina."

She disappeared silently into the cavern of Starstone Chamber. Atel slid the door back and cocked his head, a grotesque silhouette against the faintly hazed oval opening. After a moment, Anderson heard the sound too: a weird, intermittent buzzing noise. It set his teeth on edge, and sent little waves of sheer hatred coursing through his body. The stocky Varan drew him out onto the platform and pointed upward.

"Borers," he grunted. "You can see one from here."

It was quite high, about half-way between the summit of the tower and the surface of the rock sky, and moving very slowly. It reminded Anderson of a legless centipede—a long, joined cylinder, with the same stony, red-veined texture that the great bowl presented. In the feeble light he thought he saw small openings appearing and vanishing: the space-beasts, moving about inside their mechanism! The brief glimpse was somehow the most horrible thing he had ever seen. He could distinguish at least two other tones in the gruesome buzzing, and he knew that the borer was not alone above the city.

"They've learned that hollow things are deadly—learned from us," Atel spat out bitterly. "See the column of light inching out from the borer's nose? They are disintegrating a tunnel for their vacuum torpedos. It's a slow-motion kind of warfare—but when one side wins constantly, it can't last forever. Feel the radiation?"

Anderson discovered that he was

scratching. His skin felt as if he had a mild sunburn. "The boring mechanism?" he suggested.

"Right," Atel admitted, his tone grudging. "Matter-against-matter generates radiant heat. Space-against-space generates X-rays and worse. Deadly stuff! If our gunners can only—"

Anderson never heard the end of the sentence. Without the slightest warning he was again sprawling through the hot dark air—

Alone!

III

KIMBALL'S RIGHT SHOE caught in a burrow and he fell again. This time the expected shock came late; evidently he had been on the brink of a pit of some sort, for his shoulders slammed against the hard ground with an unexpected impact, and he slowed down a long decline. He lay at the bottom for an indefinite period—neither time nor distance had any meaning in this blackness—and then got up again.

Through the steady, muted roaring which had been in his ears ever since he had dropped from the torus coil, a roaring like the sound in a seasbell, multiplied to the point of madness, a leathery muttering sound began to grow. He yanked his flashlight from the belt-clip and shot a cone of light upward.

He was rewarded with a ululating, deafening scream, and something winged and huge sheered off from the beam. The muttering of the wings faded again, and with it went a sticky blubbering, like the crying of an idiot child. Sick at his stomach, he pumped a shot after it, and was surprised to hear it scream again.

That would hold them for a while. They weren't very cautious about the automatic, for they seemed to expect that he would score a hit with it only by rare chance; but they hated the flashlight. They'd not try that dive-bombing stunt on him soon again.

He could hear them settling around the rim of the pit. Deliberately he lit a cigarette. For a second he could see the bulky, pasty bodies and the blinded heads arching above him; then they all whispered with agony and drew away out of sight.

Even the dim coal of the burning fag was too much for them.

But before long the batteries of the flashlight would be drained, the cigarettes gone, the matches exhausted. When that time came, Kimball knew, he would be torn to tatters, but it didn't bother him much now. He had been almost unconscious with fatigue when the badly-adjusted master machine had dumped him into this nightmare; but the beasts, savage though they were, had been curious. For a while they had questioned him with very little hostility, and had aroused his interest enough to give him second — or had it been twenty-second? — wind. Their upsetting version of telepathy, which projected subtly different emotional states instead of ideas, had awakened him thoroughly.

He had just realized that he had arrived *inside* the Earth, probably in a space-negative state to boot, when he had felt the urge for a cigarette . . .

He sighed and stood up. There was no way to tell how long he had been in this midnight universe, but if he could only stick it out until a full twenty-four hours were up, the master machine would act on him again. The faulty windings of its coils would prevent it from returning him to the abandoned grocery as it was supposed to do—but at least it would throw him out of *this* black, demon-haunted universe.

At his movement, the beasts rustled eagerly back to the rim of the pit, scarcely audible in the mass echo which was as natural to the hollow world as air. He turned on the flashlight, pointing it at the ground—he did not care to hear them all scream at once. There was a thundering flurry of wings above him; then silence.

Doggishly, he began to climb. *Keep moving*, he thought, *you can sleep in your next universe—wherever that'll be.*

The beasts wheeled patiently.

ANDRESON lay tasting the sensation of being dead for several minutes before he realized that he was hardly even jarred. His eyes were open, but nothing he could see made sense to him. There was no sign of Atel. Lying flat on his back, he looked stupidly upward at a column of soft light that seemed to reach miles into the air, ending in glowing haze. The rock dome had vanished, and in its place was a

pattern of gigantic, garish stalactites.

Wait a minute. There was something familiar here—

He rolled over cautiously and found an edge to the mysterious surface he had fallen to. He thrust his head over it and peered downward.

The rock dome was below him, not above! The space beasts, who reacted to gravity in reverse, had imposed their environment upon the city. Only the solarium platform, which had been directly above where he had been standing on the catwalk, had saved him from mashing against the dome. He wondered if the Varan gunners had been able to hit any of the borer's under these conditions. He couldn't hear the huzzing sound—no, wait, there was a single buzzing tone, seemingly far away. Well, two down, anyhow.

A winged figure sailed by below him, its pinions tensely outspread, gulling the air. He shouted at it, but there was no response. He wondered what had happened to Atel. He must have fallen from the catwalk, too, but certainly he couldn't have been hurt—he didn't look like the type to pass out in mid-air. Anderson called again. After a pause, an infinitely remote response came back to him: *Atelatelletelletelellll* . . .

The echo of his first shout! The Varan must have forgotten about him in the shock of the reversal, and flown off to his post, leaving the Earthman stranded. Anderson knew it was quite possible that he had been deliberately abandoned, but he forced himself not to think about it.

Right now, he had to get off this ledge, and back inside a building. A preferable spot would be Atel's rooms; they were close, and there would be only a short, harmless distance to fall either way, no matter what the warring factions did with the city's gravity. Yet Atel's doorway, so mockingly close, was in reality as good as miles away unless he could figure out something nearly as good as flying!

Suppose he should wait where he was, and fall back to the catwalk when the Varans succeeded in neutralizing the effect? He shuddered. The catwalk was narrow and he might easily miss it. In any case, it might take a long time—the space-beasts seemed to have the edge on the Varans so far, and if they won, he'd starve here. He

eyed the wall of the building above him. It was about twenty feet "up" to the catwalk, and no handholds were visible. The top side—now the "under" side—of the solarium platform was no better; all the furniture had long since fallen away, and even had it been still there, bolted to the surface, he'd have thought twice before trying to crawl from couch to couch toward Starstone Chamber's roof. It was a long way to the rock sky.

He risked standing up, hoping that the Varese would not choose this instant to change things around again—if they did, he'd be dumped on his head. The illusion of *downness* was quite perfect, but it was hard to forget that it was an illusion. His knees wobbled as if he were standing on a pile of telephone books.

After steadying himself against the wall, he made a slow circuit of the tower, stepping over the structural members of the platform cautiously. No doorways here—even a flying people usually enter floors from the top side. Returning, he eyed the upper edge of the catwalk doorway. It was an eight-foot opening, and he was exactly six feet tall; that left a margin of about six feet, which he might be able to jump. He wasn't in very good shape, and the platform didn't offer much of a starting run, but he'd have to chance it.

He backed gingerly to the edge of the platform, hunched, ran, leaped. He struck the glassy wall at full length, and clawed frantically at it—

Missed. The drop back to the deck knocked the wind out of him again, but he got up stubbornly. Crouch . . . run . . . leap—

HIS hands latched over the edge of the lintel and closed on it. Drawing his knees up into his waist, he planted his toes and heaved. The first push got his elbows over the edge, and after a long struggle he managed to bend his body over it at the belt. Suspended, he looked dizzily "down" at the inside of the Chamber, his feet dangling in thin air.

It was only an equivalent distance to the bottom side of the inner solarium platform, but he didn't want to go that way. There'd be no sense in rattling aimlessly about the roof of the hall, waiting for his back to be broken across the seats. Some-

how, he had to work himself down to the catwalk.

There was no other way but to shinny along the side of the lintel. He swapped ends, so that his legs were now in the Chamber, and took off his shoes and socks with a good deal of difficulty. His feet were sweating—indeed, he was wet all over—so he wiped them with the tops of the socks; then he began precariously to inch himself upward.

By the time he made the bottom side of the catwalk, he was weak with fear, and his clothes were soaked; but he couldn't allow himself any time to recover, for there was now nothing "above" him but the chasm of the city street. He worked his way across on his hands and knees—no matter which way "down" was, this was a thin bridge for an earthbound man, a bridge much more decorative than it was useful—and lowered himself over the edge until he could curl his body around Atel's doorway.

A moment later he was sprawled on Atel's ceiling, amid a litter of the surly Varan's personal effects. He had hardly come to rest when he fainted with a small sigh.

THE second flipover of the city's gravity barely jounced him, but it seemed to cause a lot of damage elsewhere. He had just gotten to his feet when a terrific crash rang from the street below, and was followed at once by others in other parts of the metropolis. He went to the catwalk and looked over it—very tentatively, for he was warier than ever of open spaces—but the distance was too great. He guessed that something which hadn't been fastened down when the original reversal took place had just made the return trip.

As he peered, four or five of the winged people stepped from a platform far below his eyrie, and began to mount. Since they were between him and the glowing side of the next building, he did not recognize Atel and Jina among them until they were almost upon him.

As they settled gracefully on the catwalk, he noted with some surprise that they were all armed with a glass-muzzled, pistol-like weapon instead of the usual metal bar; and judging from their expressions, they anticipated trouble.

"I see you weren't killed," Atel said grimly. He seemed a bit disappointed.

"No. But I did a lot of dropping back and forth," Andreson returned acidly. "Why the artillery?"

"These men are members of the Council Guard. They think you're a spy of some sort. They suspect me, too, for forgetting about you during the fighting."

"That's ridiculous!" Jina burst in, her breast pulsing hotly. "They never thought of it until you suggested it!"

"We can't afford to run any risks."

"Who am I spying for?" Andreson demanded. "The beasts? Jina's right—it is ridiculous."

"Yes, the beasts," one of the Guardsmen said flatly. "You're a native of Earth, no matter what your Time, and so are they. You could easily be the vanguard of a raid."

Andreson's temper was already short from the buffeting he had taken. "There's not a shred of evidence for such a theory," he snapped.

"Unfortunately, there is," Atel purred. "We noticed a beast traveling through the foundations of the city, just below the energy barrier, and managed to trap it. We let it get up into a pillar and then energized both ends. We were just about to kill it with hollow slugs when it materialized—the first time the beasts have ever succeeded in doing it, and it's an evil augury."

"Well? I still don't see..."

"It was an Earthman."

Andreson's mind nibbled around the edges of the fact. It was startling enough in itself, but he could make little sense of it. How would an Earthman have gotten into the reverse universe? And how at this Time in the dim past?

"Perhaps it's another victim of the gallery," he suggested, frowning. "It never occurred to me before, but that infernal place might have been set up deliberately as a time-trap—perhaps by the beasts!"

"Perhaps," the Guardsman said. "But we can see no purpose behind such time-trapping, and Atel's interpretation makes better sense. Come along with us."

Andreson shrugged. "Where to?"

"Starstone Chamber. The Council has been called to vote on what dispensation to make of both of you, Atel—hold his other arm. If the beasts wear down our shield

we will all be thrown on our heads again."

The Earthman allowed the Varans to take his elbows without any protest. He had a very vivid picture of himself buttered crimsonly over the inner surface of the rock arching above. *Save the heroes for later*, he thought.

He had imagined a Council meeting as a huge affair, with all the banked chairs filled; but actually there were only about twenty of the Varese present, plus the lone, mysterious Earthman. Andreson scanned the stranger's features eagerly as they approached.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he shouted. "What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Ken," Kimball said calmly. "I hardly know myself. Read my letter yet?"

"No. Say—are you responsible for that Surrealist trickery back in our own time? I should have guessed it. I ought to push your face in."

"I wouldn't blame you," the scientist agreed. "But I never dreamed you'd hit upon it by accident, before you'd read my note explaining what it was. In the letter I made a date to meet you there, and I arrived a little early. I went out to pick up some supplies, and while I was gone—well—"

"I'll have to let you off this time. You already look a bit damaged, Johnny."

DAMAGED was hardly the word. Kimball looked as if he had been caught in a cement mixer. His clothes were filthy and cut to ribbons; bloody knees showed through holes in his trousers, he had a long, raw cut across his forehead, and his voice was husky with weariness.

The Varans had listened to the conversation with polite impatience, mixed with suspicion. The Councilman who wore the gem on his forehead, a replica of the giant diamond above them, broke in with an authoritative gesture, waving the group to seats.

"Mr. Kimball has offered us certain explanations," he said. "They seem adequate; it appears that he is the agency of Mr. Andreson's misfortune. But we are losing one battle, and can't afford to take on another. Our major question must be—How can we believe you?"

"One problem at a time," Kimball said. "About your present battle. I've watched

your whole history, and I know you're doomed to lose it. This city will be deserted in another century. But it will be an orderly retreat, and will result in the complete extermination of the space-beasts."

Atel's mouth drew down at the corners. "Obviously a fabrication. If we wiped out the beasts, why should we leave?"

"Because you'll wipe them out with matter-bombs, set to fall into their universe in their state, and then explode into yours. The process will cause violent earthquakes on Earth's surface—it'll change the whole climate of the planet, wipe out the giant reptiles, start the tiny mammals on their long upward climb toward the species Ken and I represent. Your civilization wouldn't survive such an upheaval. By the time things have quieted down, you'll be more comfortable on Venus."

There was a small stir of surprise among the Varans. "We already have a small colony on Venus," the Council head admitted in a somewhat friendly voice. "But as things stand now, I cannot see how we can hold them off for the rest of a century!"

"I can help you there. You work on sun-power, right?"

"Yes. The mining of atomic fuels on this savage planet would not be fruitful. But that rock dome over our heads has cut us off, and our stored power will give out shortly. We've already had to cut down on the city's lighting, and we're trying to drill the dome."

"You'll never drill that dome in a thousand years. It's maintained by atomics—it might just as well be pure neutronium for all the dent you'll make in it. I can show you how to build a time-coil. We'll just open a window onto Tomorrow Noon and let the sunlight stream in on your main converter. It's really quite simple once you know the principle."

"By the Jewell! Have you repealed the law of the conservation of energy?"

"Not at all. Just doesn't apply. Energy taken from one Time doesn't alter the total available in the continuum. Here, I'll show you." He pulled out a pencil. "Got any paper? No? Ken, do you still have that letter on you?"

"Here you are," said Andreson, handing it over. "I'm glad it's going to be good for something, anyhow."

THE BESIEGED CITY was dark, except for a few furtive gleams far below. On the solarium platform they could see little but the dim shapes of the nearby pinnacles; and the tiny rivers of light quivering on the glassy flanks. Above, the stone cap pressed down heavily. Despite Kimball's time-window into Tomorrow Noon, the confined air was hot, motionless, enervating.

"It's a bad age, Jina," Andreson said. "Full of warfare and misery. I don't think you'd like it."

Jina stirred protestingly beside him. "You paint it in very dark colors, Ken. We have our own war here, and the jungle, the storms, the great reptiles..."

She broke off as a dark figure swooped silently from the depths, passed them, and began to rise more slowly toward the dome. A tiny glow at its head made a red trail in the dimness, and it did not seem to have any wings.

"That must be your friend," the girl murmured, pointing. "See—he has one of those things called cigarettes, that he smokes all the time."

"Yes," said Andreson, not much interested. Since Kimball had arrived, he had been the center of interest among most of the Varans, and Andreson had been allowed to shift for himself. It had taken some persuasion on Johnny's part to get Andreson a copy of the anti-gravity "wings" with which they had equipped the Earth physicist. For a while the neglect had nettled Andreson, and at the moment he definitely did not want to talk to Kimball. Jina interested him a good deal more.

But Jina was still dreaming of her picture of Earth, as it would be millions of years hence. Before Andreson could protest, she leapt into the air and soared after the trailing cigarette glow. He watched, grousing, while the little red spark halted in mid-air and did a short minuet. Finally he stood up, picked up the heavy torpedo of his own levitator, clipped the control box to his belt, climbed into the parachute-harness. A touch of his finger sent him skyward.

"Hello, Ken," Kimball said cheerfully. "Hello."

"I was just on my way to test the apex of the dome. Seems like we might make a break-through there."

"Soon, I hope."

Kimball dropped his cigarette and watched it fall regretfully toward the distant, almost invisible city. "Not many of those left—I'll be glad to get out of here myself." He lit another. In the brief match-flare, Jina's graceful, wheeling figure became visible like some angelic dream. "Why don't you go back now, Ken? I've already built a gate back to our own time. The Varese don't use much radioactive material, so I had to go back for supplies. You could go through just as simply."

"Yes," said Jina's voice from the blackness. "Why not, Ken?"

"This guy Atel seems to be after your pelt, and you're no match for him in his own environment," Johnny Kimball added. "It isn't as if the Varese needed you. I know the technical aspects of the situation, and I can hold my end up. But you could leave any time."

"Why are you staying?"

"Two reasons. First, I'm not inhuman, and I got handled roughly by the beasts. I'd like to see them smashed. Second, I can't market my time-coil—you can imagine what chaos it'd cause in our world!—but the Varese have promised me this anti-gravity-pack, and that's worth a lot." He waited for an answer, but Andreson didn't see any sense in making one. After a moment his friend sighed. "Well, got to get aloft." The glowing cigarette arced upwards dimming gradually.

Wings pulsed softly past Andreson's cheek. "Why are you staying?" Jina whispered.

He tried to answer, but the moment's besitation was fatal. The girl arrowed downward, a slim, lovely shadow in the artificial dusk. Her sweet, chiming voice drifted back tauntingly.

"Explain to the beasts!"

For a moment Andreson hung motionless in his harness, keenly aware that he was perhaps the loneliest man since Adam. The city looked like a tinsel toy below him, and all around him was darkness and silence; the nearest human being was the only one within millenia of him, and among the Varese he had just one friend—maybe.

Out of the murk a voice called mockingly. "What are you dreaming, Earthman? Or should we say—plotting?"

Andreson recognized the voice for Atel's, but could not place its direction. "I'm on my way to join my friend at the apex of the dome," he said shortly. "I'm not plotting anything, except getting home as soon as possible."

"Oh? That's odd." The Varan's voice roughened, then regained its first silkiness with obvious effort. "I passed Jina on the way up. I thought you two might have been having a talk."

"Suppose we were?" Andreson demanded. "What's that to you?"

The voice was closer now, and its tone was cold and hard. Andreson rested his fingers lightly on the levitator controls, still looking about him in the blackness.

"A great deal to me. When the Council Council voted to let your scientist accomplice have a free hand, I had to go along. But I still think you're both spies, and up to something dangerous." He paused, and at the same moment Andreson spotted him—circling with silent, outspread wings, about twenty-five feet up from where the Earthman hung. He went right on looking, as if he had seen nothing, turning his head from side to side in apparent bewilderment.

"Follow us around, then, if you have the time to waste," he said. "Two men against a city—you can afford to be brave. The odds are all on your side."

"You ground-grubber," the Varan gritted. "Follow you around—while you corrupt a Varan girl with your lies about the future, and plot to let the beasts in! Do you think I'm such a fool? The Council is blind with sitting so long under the Starstone—but there are still a few of us who can see!"

"What with?" Andreson taunted. "You seem to be all mouth."

With a low snarl of rage, Atel plunged. His powerful wings furled tightly around his body, he dropped straight for the Earthman. In the dim light, Andreson saw his massive right arm reach back to his belt—he was drawing his vacuum club—

ANDRESON jammed the button home and shot skyward. Inexperience told against him almost at once, for he had drawn the line too fine. His shoulder slammed hard against Atel's, and the bat-winged creature tumbled away from him.

The harness continued to haul Andreson blindly upwards. His collar-bone sent out sharp pains with every movement. It seemed to be broken, or cracked at least. Was Atel — no — there he was, wings thrashing the air as he arrested his fall. The Earthman poked the belt-control again, hovered over his fluttering opponent—two could play at this power-dive game—

Feet first, he arrowed downward, the hot air roaring in his ears. Somehow Atel saw him coming, furled his wings again—

For what seemed an eternity the two fell, the city swelling beneath them from a hazy splotch to a bright quilt, and from that to a glowing cloudy mass. A jabbing finger reversed Andreson's belt, and slowly he began to gain. In the growing light he could see Atel's face, turned up toward him, smiling sardonically.

Then the bat-wings boomed out and Atel was gone, sailing easily around the nearest tower. Andreson saw the thin, transparent thread of a bridge almost upon him, and tried to brake, but it was too late—if he stopped at this speed he'd black out—

The bridge burst under his plummeting feet with the sound of a waterfall of plate glass, and something snapped in his left foot, sending fresh waves of pain through his body. The harness cut into him, yanking against his momentum, and he tried to pull out. At the bottom of his immense plunge he could clearly see figures in the once-distant streets. Then he began to rise again—

Instantly sharp-ribbed wings battered at him, an open hand struck him a terrific blow behind the ear, and a second later something long and steel-hard thudded into his ribs. He was flung forcibly against the side of the nearby building. Only the mechanical obedience of the levitator saved him—it had been set for "up," and it dragged him on up, willy-nilly. A hot liquid oozed down his side from the blow of the vacuum-rod. In a fog of pain he saw Atel banking purposefully for another assault, and clutched at the "Up" control again.

The levitator could climb faster than the Varan could, and Andreson had a moment's respite. Grimly he kept on going, until a growing sense of pressure and heat warned him that the rock dome was near. Should he try to lose himself among the

city towers, or yell to Johnny Kimball for help?

His whole heart turned from the thought. His earthly life had not kept him in very good physical shape, but he'd always fought his own battles. It made no difference that his life was the stake of this one. *I'll get him yet*, he thought intensely. *Get him without help—if it kills me.*

"Well, Earthman," Atel's voice rang out below. The rock dome sent back a huge echo. "Running already? If Jina could see her hero now!"

For a moment Anderson was about to dive furiously after the Varan again, but he thought better of it. He remembered Johnny's words; "You're no match for him in his own environment." But—

Atel was not fighting another winged man. He was fighting an Earthman with a levitator. That scrap between the buildings—had Atel given such a buffeting to a Varan he would have knocked him and that would have been the end of it. But the levitator couldn't be knocked out, no matter what happened to the man operating it. It wouldn't fall unless it was set to fall.

There was something else, too. Birds fly because they're built for it—among other things they have a huge keel-like breastbone to which their flying muscles are anchored. But bats don't, and Anderson bet that the Varans didn't either. Rodents are ancestrally ground-animals, just like Earthmen, and have to adapt for flying in some other way...

Anderson smiled crookedly. There was only one way to test the idea. He touched the belt again, and the city began to swell beneath him—

Atel glided cautiously out of the way of his fall, then closed in. The Earthman shot off laterally, turned, began a tail-chase. For a few seconds the absurd circling continued, each combatant trying to gain on the other. Then Atel realized that the levitator could drive Anderson faster than he could fly, and spun to face him with a single sweep of his wings.

Anderson made no attempt to stop. He shot directly into the Varan's arms. The vacuum rod crashed into his injured side again. Gritting his teeth, he grasped Atel around the chest, trying for a half-Nelson.

The wings fluttered—the bar thudded home once more—

Then Atel broke free. "Monster!" he gasped.

"What's the matter, Atel?" Anderson shouted raggedly. "Met your match?"

For an answer the Varan shot at him head first, like a gull-winged rocket. Anderson flung himself lengthwise and grappled once more. Atel's body, as he had suspected, was remarkably light, probably hollow boned—and his arms were not nearly as strong as his wings. They simply couldn't be!

This was the death struggle. Fiercely the two strove against each other. Anderson locked one of the flailing legs, steadily forced the great body back. He had one hand free for a split second, and he grasped the belt-control—

The garish glow of the city began to brighten at an alarming rate. Atel's hands fastened upon the Earthman's throat; Anderson pried weakly at them, but he had already lost too much blood to be able to free himself with one hand. He clung doggedly to the belt-control with the other. The city grew and grew—the blood pounded in his head, and his lungs burned like twin sacs of acid—the pillars of cold fire that were the city's towers flowed past him, blurring rapidly—

At the last instant Atel realized what was happening. A scream of terror was whipped from his mouth into the slipstream, and he released Anderson's throat to claw frantically at the hand on the belt-control—

But it had been too late seconds ago. Anderson let go of him entirely, kicked himself free, began to brake. The Varan spread his wings—and lost his life. The right pinion snapped back and broke at once. The vanes on the left somehow withstood the blast, but the membrane between them could not—in a split second the living fabric was bloody tatters. Atel's body slammed itself to jelly against the bright Earth.

Dizzy and sick, Anderson concentrated on cutting down the terrific velocity the levitator had built up. He succeeded fairly well, though he broke the other foot when he struck.

The levitator held him upright, swaying. A cloud of winged creatures gathered

around him. One of them he thought he recognized.

"Jina—"

"Yes—Ken—we saw most of the fighting—bow—"

"I outflow him," he said proudly, and then passed out for the third time.

JOHNNY KIMBALL peered out the door of the chamber the Varans had assigned as his laboratory, and grinned. "Quite a formal farewell committee coming across the bridge," he said. "Looks like the whole Council's in it."

He looked Andreson over critically. "For a while I was afraid they'd turn out to be Indian-givers on the levitator deal," he added, "but I must say you threw yourself into the job of protecting our interests. Look at you! Both feet bandaged, chest bound, right shoulder strapped up—if ever a man needed a levitator, you do!"

"Ah, dry up," Andreson growled. "How near through are you?"

"Almost. I'm not trying to hit the gallery, though it might be easier that way." Suddenly he became serious. "I'll tell you what, Ken. It's a new life we're going back to—a life where you and I can look back into the past whenever we want, and visit it, too, if we keep quiet about it. And it's a new world we're going back to, a world which is going to be given the levitator. That means free flight—not just flight in machines, but real flight, where one man can fly whenever, wherever he wants, without having to board a plane or pay a fare. And space-travel, and no heavy lifting for the housewife, and—"

"Get to the point."

Kimball looked a bit crestfallen. "I thought you'd understand how I felt. Well, I couldn't see going back to the old world at the same spot we left it. I had a new apartment rented when I left, that I'd never been in—hasn't even got any furniture in it. I want to put the Time-window through into there. A fresh start."

Andreson nodded. "A good idea, Johnny. But—make it quick."

Along the sunlit bridge the delegation of Varans walked ceremoniously. In the vanguard was a lovely shape, like an exquisite

butterfly. Kimball looked out the door again and saw her. With a slight smile he left the room; Andreson didn't notice.

"Farewell, Ken."

"Farewell, Jina, I'm sorry to go."

There was a brief, stiff silence, and then she was in his arms, sobbing bitterly.

"Ken—why, why?"

He swallowed. "Do you remember, up there on the solarium ledge before the rock dome was destroyed—remember I said I had a question I had to answer?"

"Yes... what—was it?"

"Just this: *Can Earth and Air mix?* There's a legend in my time that few people understand, but I think I understand it. It's the story of Lilith, queen of Air and Darkness. She fought with Satan and God alike for the Earth, but she lost, because she was not part of their universe. It's the same with me. What part could I play in a time not my own, among people who live in the air?"

The girl did not move or answer. Steadily he went on: "Besides—there's a gap between us greater than parsecs or centuries. Look." He took her hand in his, held it up. The delicate, four-fingered limb made his own five stubby fingers look lumpy and misshapen. "We have no future together, Jina. We seem alike, but we're not. The apes are my cousins; the bats are yours. You should stay with your own race, and have the children I could never give you. We have no real happiness to give each other."

She drew back and squared her shoulders proudly, though her eyes still brimmed with tears. "You are right," she said. "Go back, then! But I extract one promise before you go."

He inclined his head. "Whatever I can do."

"You have the time-coil, and can visit any age you wish. Promise me—that you'll never come to this one again."

He said softly, "I promise, Jina."

Her first soft kiss was her last. The next instant, it was as if she had never been.

"Ready, Ken?"

The time-coil throbbed once, and then the glass-walled chamber was empty in the red sunlight.



The two spheres clanged together and then disappeared!

Brooklyn Project

By WILLIAM TENN

The last and greatest Project, this—and the safest to watch. Just two steel balls, going off into time. Why was Press Correspondent Culpepper so nervous?

THE GLEAMING BOWLS OF light set in the creamy ceiling dulled when the huge, circular door at the back of the booth opened. They returned to white brilliance as the chubby man in the severe black jumper swung the door shut behind him and dogged it down again.

Twelve reporters of both sexes exhaled very loudly as he sauntered to the front of the booth and turned his back to the semi-opaque screen stretching across it.

Then they all rose in deference to the cheerful custom of standing whenever a security official of the government was in the room.

He smiled pleasantly, waved at them and scratched his nose with a wad of mimeographed papers. His nose was large and it seemed to give added presence to his person. "Sit down, ladies and gentlemen, do sit down. We have no official fol-de-rol in the Brooklyn Project. I am your

guide, as you might say, for the duration of this experiment; the acting secretary to the executive assistant on press relations. My name is not important. Please pass these among you."

They each took one of the mimeographed sheets and passed the rest on. Leaning back in the metal bucket-seats, they tried to make themselves comfortable. Their host squinted through the heavy screen and up at the wall clock which had one slowly revolving hand. He patted his black garment jovially where it was tight around the middle.

"To business. In a few moments, man's first large-scale excursion into time will begin. Not by humans, but with the aid of a photographic and recording device which will bring us incalculably rich data on the past. With this experiment, the Brooklyn Project justifies ten billion dollars and over eight years of scientific development; it shows the validity not merely of a new method of investigation, but of a weapon which will make our glorious country even more secure, a weapon which our enemies may justifiably dread.

"Let me caution you, first, not to attempt the taking of notes even if you have been able to smuggle pens and pencils through Security. Your stories will be written entirely from memory. You all have a copy of the Security Code with the latest additions as well as a pamphlet referring specifically to Brooklyn Project regulations. The sheets you have just received provide you with the required lead for your story; they also contain suggestions as to treatment and coloring. Beyond that—so long as you stay within the framework of the documents mentioned—you are entirely free to write your stories in your own variously original ways. The press, ladies and gentlemen, must remain untouched and uncontaminated by government control. Now, any questions?"

THE twelve reporters looked at the floor. Five of them began reading from their sheets. The paper rustled noisily.

"What, no questions? Surely there must be more interest than this in a project which has broken the last possible frontier—the fourth dimension, time. Come now, you are the representatives of the nation's curiosity—you must have questions. Brad-

ley, you look doubtful. What's bothering you? I assure you, Bradley, that I don't bite."

They all laughed and grinned at each other.

Bradley half-rose and pointed at the screen. "Why does it have to be so thick? I'm not the slightest bit interested in finding out how chronar works, but all we can see from here is a greyed and blurry picture of men dragging apparatus around on the floor. And why does the clock only have one hand?"

"A good question," the acting secretary said. His large nose seemed to glow. "A very good question. First, the clock has but one hand, because, after all, Bradley, this is an experiment in Time, and Security feels that the time of the experiment itself may, through some unfortunate combination of information leakage and foreign correlation—in short, a clue might be needlessly exposed. It is sufficient to know that when the hand points to the red dot, the experiment will begin. The screen is translucent and the scene below somewhat blurry for the same reason: camouflage of detail and adjustment. I am empowered to inform you that the *details* of the apparatus are—uh, very significant. Any other questions? Culpepper? Culpepper of Consolidated, isn't it?"

"Yes sir. Consolidated News Service. Our readers are very curious about that incident of the Federation of Chronar Scientists. Of course, they have no respect or pity for them—the way they acted and all—but just what did they mean by saying that this experiment was dangerous because of insufficient data? And that fellow, Dr. Shayson, their president, do you know if he'll be shot?"

The man in black pulled at his nose and paraded before them thoughtfully. "I must confess that I find the views of the Federation of Chronar Scientists—or the federation of *chronic sighers*, as we at Pike's Peak prefer to call them—are a trifle too exotic for my tastes; I rarely bother with weighing the opinions of a traitor in any case. Shayson himself may or may not have incurred the death penalty for revealing the nature of the work with which he was entrusted. On the other hand, he—uh, *may not* or *may have*. That is all I can say about him for reasons of security."

Reasons of security. At mention of the dread phrase, every reporter had straightened against the hard back of his chair. Culpepper's face had lost its pinkness in favor of a glossy white. They can't consider the part about Shayson a leading question, he thought desperately. But I shouldn't have cracked about that damned federation!

Culpepper lowered his eyes and tried to look as ashamed of the vicious idiots as he possibly could. He hoped the acting secretary to the executive assistant on press relations would notice his horror.

THE CLOCK began ticking very loudly. Its hand was now only one-fourth of an arc from the red dot at the top. Down on the floor of the immense laboratory, activity had stopped. All of the seemingly tiny men were clustered around two great spheres of shining metal resting against each other. Most of them were watching dials and switchboards intently; a few, their tasks completed, chatted with the circle of black-jumpered Security guards.

"We are almost ready to begin Operation Periscope. Operation Periscope, of course, because we are, in a sense, extending a periscope into the past—a periscope which will take pictures and record events of various periods ranging from fifteen thousand years to four billion years ago. We felt that in view of the various critical circumstances attending this experiment—international, scientific—a more fitting title would be Operation Crossroads. Unfortunately, that title has been—uh, preempted."

Everyone tried to look as innocent of the nature of that other experiment as years of staring at locked library shelves would permit.

"No matter. I will now give you a brief background in chronar practice as cleared by Brooklyn Project Security. Yes, Bradley?"

Bradley again got partly out of his seat. "I was wondering—we know there has been a Manhattan Project, a Long Island Project, a Westchester Project and now a Brooklyn Project. Has there ever been a Bronx Project? I come from the Bronx; you know, civic pride."

"Quite. Very understandable. However, if there is a Bronx Project you may be

assured that until its work has been successfully completed, the only individuals outside of it who will know of its existence are the President and the Secretary of Security. If—if, I say—there is such an institution, the world will learn of it with the same shattering suddenness that it learned of the Westchester Project. I don't think that the world will soon forget that."

He chuckled in recollection and Culpepper echoed him a bit louder than the rest. The clock's hand was close to the red mark.

"Yes, the Westchester Project and now this; our nation shall yet be secure! Do you realize what a magnificent weapon chronar places in our democratic hands? To examine only one aspect—consider what happened to the Coney Island and Flatbush Subprojects (the events are mentioned in those sheets you've received) before the uses of chronar were fully appreciated.

"It was not yet known in those first experiments that Newton's third law of motion—action equalling reaction—held for time as well as it did for the other three dimensions of space. When the first chronar was excited backwards into time for the length of a ninth of a second, the entire laboratory was propelled into the future for a like period and returned in an—uh, unrecognizable condition. That fact, by the by, has prevented excursions into the future: the equipment seems to suffer amazing alterations and no human could survive them. But do you realize what we could do to an enemy by virtue of that property alone? Sending an adequate mass of chronar into the past while it is adjacent to a hostile nation would force that nation into the future—all of it simultaneously—a future from which it would return populated only with corpses!"

He glanced down, placed his hands behind his back and teetered on his heels. "That is why you see two spheres on the floor. Only one of them, the ball on the right, is equipped with chronar. The other is a dummy, matching the other's mass perfectly and serving as a counterbalance. When the chronar is excited, it will plunge four billion years into our past and take photographs of an earth that was still a

half-liquid, partly gaseous mass solidifying rapidly in a somewhat inchoate solar system.

"At the same time, the dummy will be propelled four billion years into the future, from whence it will return much changed but for reasons we don't completely understand. They will strike each other at what is to us now and bounce off again to approximately half the chronological distance of the first trip, where our chronar apparatus will record data of an almost solid planet, plagued by earthquakes and possibly holding forms of sub-life in the manner of certain complex molecules.

"After each collision, the chronar will return roughly half the number of years covered before, automatically gathering information each time. The geological and historical periods we expect it to touch are listed from I to XXV in your sheets; there will be more than twenty-five, naturally, before both balls come to rest, but scientists feel that all periods after that number will be touched for such a short while as to be unproductive of photographs and other material. Remember, at the end, the balls will be doing little more than throbbing in place before coming to rest, so that even though they still ricochet centuries on either side of the present, it will be almost unnoticeable. A question, I see."

The thin woman in grey tweeds beside Culpepper got to her feet. "I—I know this is irrelevant," she began, "but I haven't been able to introduce my question into the discussion at any pertinent moment, Mr. Secretary—"

"Acting secretary," the chubby little man in the black suit told her genially. "I'm only the acting secretary. Go on."

"Well, I want to say—Mr. Secretary, is there any way at all that our post-experimental examination time may be reduced? Two years is a very long time to spend inside Pike's Peak simply out of fear that one of us may have seen enough and be unpatriotic enough to be dangerous to the nation. Once our stories have passed the censors, it seems to me that we could be allowed to return to our homes after a safety period of say, three months. I have two small children and there are others here—"

"Speak for yourself, Mrs. Bryant!" the

man from Security roared. "It is Mrs. Bryant, isn't it? Mrs. Bryant of the Women's Magazine Syndicate? Mrs. *Alexis* Bryant." He seemed to be making minute pencil notes across his brain.

MRS. BRYANT sat down beside Culpepper again, clutching her copy of the amended Security Code, the special pamphlet on the Brooklyn Project and the thin mimeographed sheet of paper very close to her breast. Culpepper moved hard against the opposite arm of his chair. Why did everything have to happen to him? Then, to make matters worse, the crazy woman looked tearfully at him as if expecting sympathy. Culpepper stared across the booth and crossed his legs.

"You must remain within the jurisdiction of the Brooklyn Project because that is the only way that Security can be certain that no important information leakage will occur before the apparatus has changed beyond your present recognition of it. You didn't have to come, Mrs. Bryant—you volunteered. You all volunteered. After your editors had designated you as their choices for covering this experiment, you all had the peculiarly democratic privilege of refusing. None of you did. You recognized that to refuse this unusual honor would have shown you incapable of thinking in terms of National Security, would have, in fact, implied a criticism of the Security Code itself from the standpoint of the usual two-year examination time. And now this! For someone who had hitherto been thought as able and trustworthy as yourself, Mrs. Bryant, to emerge at this late hour with such a request makes me, why it," the little man's voice dropped to a whisper, "—it almost makes me doubt the effectiveness of our security screening methods."

Culpepper nodded angry affirmation at Mrs. Bryant who was biting her lips and trying to show a tremendous interest in the activities on the laboratory floor.

"The question was irrelevant. Highly irrelevant. It took up time which I had intended to devote to a more detailed discussion of the popular aspects of chronar and its possible uses in industry. But Mrs. Bryant must have her little feminine outburst: it makes no difference to Mrs. Bryant that our nation is daily surrounded

hy more and more hostility, more and more danger. These things matter not in the slightest to Mrs. Bryant. All she is concerned with are the two years of her life that her country asks her to surrender so that the future of her own children may be more secure."

The acting secretary smoothed his black jumper and became calmer. Tension in the booth decreased.

"Activation will occur at any moment now, so I will briefly touch upon those most interesting periods which the chronar will record for us and from which we expect the most useful data. I and II, of course, since they are the periods at which the earth was forming into its present shape. Then III, the Pre-Cambrian Period of the Proterozoic, one billion years ago, the first era in which we find distinct records of life—crustaceans and algae for the most part. VI, a hundred twenty-five million years in the past, covers the Middle Jurassic of the Mesozoic. This excursion into the so-called "Age of Reptiles" may provide us with photographs of dinosaurs and solve the old riddle of their coloring, as well as photographs, if we are fortunate, of the first appearance of mammals and birds. Finally, VIII and IX, the Oligocene and Miocene Epochs of the Tertiary Period, mark the emergence of man's earliest ancestors. Unfortunately, the chronar will be oscillating back and forth so rapidly by that time that the chance of any decent recording—"

A GONG SOUNDED. The hand of the clock touched the red mark. Five of the technicians below pulled switches and, almost before the journalists could lean forward, the two spheres were no longer visible through the heavy plastic screen. Their places were empty.

"The chronar has begun its journey to four billion years in the past! Ladies and gentlemen, an historic moment—a profoundly historic moment! It will not return for a little while; I shall use the time in pointing up and exposing the fallacies of the—ah, *federation of chronic sighers!*"

Nervous laughter rippled at the acting secretary to the executive assistant on press relations. The twelve journalists settled down to hearing the ridiculous ideas torn apart.

"As you know, one of the fears entertained about travel to the past was that the most innocent-seeming acts would cause cataclysmic changes in the present. You are probably familiar with the fantasy in its most currently popular form: if Hitler had been killed in 1930, he would not have forced scientists in Germany and later occupied countries to emigrate, this nation might not have had the atomic bomb, thus no third atomic war, and Australia would still be above the Pacific.

"The traitorous Shayson and his illegal federation extended this hypothesis to include much more detailed and minor acts such as shifting a molecule of hydrogen that in our past really was never shifted.

"At the time of the first experiment at the Coney Island Sub-project, when the chronar was sent back for one-ninth of a second, a dozen different laboratories checked through every device imaginable, searched carefully for any conceivable change. There were none! Government officials concluded that the time stream was a rigid affair, past, present and future, and nothing in it could be altered. But Shayson and his cohorts were not satisfied, they—"

* * * * *

I. Four billion years ago. The chronar floated in a cloudlet of silicon dioxide above the boiling earth and languidly collected its data with automatically operating instruments. The vapor it had displaced condensed and fell in great, shining drops.

* * * * *

"—insisted that we should do no further experimenting until we had checked the mathematical aspects of the problem yet again. They went so far as to state that it was possible that if changes occurred we would not notice them, that no instruments imaginable could detect them. They said that we would accept these changes as things that had always existed. Well! This at a time when our country—and theirs, ladies and gentlemen of the press, *theirs*, too—was in greater danger than ever. Can you—"

Words failed him. He walked up and down the booth, shaking his head. All the reporters on the long, wooden bench shook their heads with him in sympathy.

There was another gong. The two dull spheres appeared briefly, changed against each other and ricocheted off into opposite chronological directions.

"There you are," the government official waved his arms at the transparent laboratory floor above them. "The first oscillation has been completed; has anything changed? Isn't everything the same? But the dissidents would maintain that alterations have occurred and we haven't noticed them. With such faith-based, unscientific viewpoints, there can be no argument. People like these—"

* * * * *

II. Two billion years ago. The great ball clicked its photographs of the fiery, erupting ground below. Some red-hot crusts rattled off its sides. Five or six thousand complex molecules lost their basic structure as they impinged against it. A hundred didn't.

* * * * *

"—will labor thirty hours a day out of thirty-three to convince you that black isn't white, that we have seven moons instead of two. They are especially dangerous—"

A long, muted note as the apparatus collided with itself. The warm orange of the corner lights brightened as it started out again.

"—because of their learning, because they are looked to for guidance in better ways of vegetation." The government official was slithering up and down rapidly now, gesturing with all of his pseudo-pods. "We are faced with a very difficult problem, at present—"

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III. One billion years ago. The primitive triple trilobite the machine had destroyed when it materialized began drifting down wetly.

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"—a very difficult problem. The question before us: should we *shik* or shouldn't we *shik*?" He was hardly speaking English now; in fact, for some time, he hadn't been speaking at all. He had been stating his thoughts by slapping one pseudopod against the other—as he always had . . .

IV. A half-billion years ago. Many different kinds of bacteria died as the water changed temperature slightly.

* * * * *

"This, then, is no time for half-measures. If we can reproduce well enough—"

V. Two hundred fifty million years ago. VI. A hundred twenty-five million years ago.

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"—to satisfy the Five Who Spiral, we have—"

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VII. Sixty-two million years. VIII. Thirty-one million. IX. Fifteen million. X. Seven and a half million.

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"—spared all attainable virtue. Then—"

* * * * *

XI. XII. XIII. XIV. XV. XVI. XVII. XVIII. XIX. Bong—bong—bong bong-bongbongongongngngngggg . . .

* * * * *

"—we are indeed ready for refraction. And that, I tell you is good enough for those who billow and those who snap. But those who billow will be proven wrong as always, for in the snapping is the rolling and in the rolling is only truth. There need be no change merely because of a sodden cilia. The apparatus has rested at last in the fractional conveyance; shall we view it subtly?"

They all agreed, and their bloated purple bodies dissolved into liquid and flowed up and around to the apparatus. When they reached its four square blocks, now no longer shrilling mechanically, they rose, solidified and regained their slime-washed forms.

"See," cried the thing that had been the acting secretary to the executive assistant on press relations. "See, no matter how subtly! Those who billow were wrong: we haven't changed." He extended fifteen purple blobs triumphantly. "Nothing has changed!"



"I'm taking that ship out myself!"

Synthetic Hero

By ERIK FENNEL

George Carlin had ruthlessly trampled his way to industrial power. Naturally, to win undying gratitude, he had to buy a one-way ticket to the moon.

EVERY DAY PEOPLE TRAVEL great distances to stand in silence before the statue at Southwestern Spaceport. It is a shrine.

The figure stands with arms raised in an upreaching, yearning gesture that invokes thoughts of man's potential greatness, and the face seen beneath the helmet wears an expression of inspired nobility and idealism. In the indestructible imperium alloy image that is his masterpiece,

Hayden Brush successfully captured the spirit of enthusiasm and adulation which swept the world. In a strange way it is not so much a statue of an individual as of an idea, for the sculptor worked entirely from photographs taken with a telephoto lens. He never met his subject.

A plaque on the granite base carries numerous words—sacrifice for the Greater Good—advancement of Man's frontiers—conquest of disease and death. And a name,

George Carlin. Whenever I read that I recall the ancient witicism about this history being the fabric of accepted lies. In it there is much truth.

On the moon is another shrine, unvisited because the surface of Luna is still a perilous and inhospitable place. No compelling work of art is to be found there. Nothing but a roughly circular blasted area containing scattered fragments of spaceship hull that scorch in the direct sunlight and freeze in the unrelieved darkness, riddled by colonies of creeping moon-lice that penetrate the toughest metal.

That is the real, the veritable shrine.

THE IDEA of building a spaceship did not enter George Carlin's mind until after he contracted the dread—and at that time incurable — Matson's Disease. And then he thought of it only as the most spectacular form of suicide ever devised. That was typical of the man.

George Carlin, owner of Carlin Industries and indubitably the richest and worst spoiled individual on the North American continent, was an irresponsible egocentric who had never done anyone a good turn in all his thirty-six years of life. Bad turns he had done in plenty.

Take just this one example. A doctor had the effrontery to submit to a medical journal an article suggesting a possible connection between the bone-destroying virus infection called Matson's Disease and Carlin Industries' highly profitable operations in thawing Antarctic areas with atomic heat. He hinted that age-old spores might have been released from the melting ice, and been carried to seaports.

Carlin's private intelligence operatives got wind of the article before publication, and Carlin himself ordered that measures be taken. The campaign was short and filthy, ending with the unfortunate doctor discredited and barred from practice on framed evidence. The article was not printed.

And then came a morning when George Carlin noticed a slight soreness in his ribs and his fingers detected a peculiar flexibility. For a while he could not believe it. Such things just did not happen to him. To others perhaps, but he was above them. For he was George Carlin.

7—Planet—Fall

But when the symptoms not only persisted but increased he was at last forced to a realization of doom. Gradually his bones would soften and dissolve, until in a year or two he would be a mere lump of quivering flesh without a skeleton to give it shape. He did not tell his physician. That was useless, for the atypical plague had defied all efforts of medical science. Instead he reacted in characteristic fashion by getting grossly and disgustingly drunk.

During the hangover he decided upon suicide. There was nothing unique about this; thousands upon thousands of victims had taken the short road rather than helplessly endure the horrors of the final stages. But mere suicide was not enough for George Carlin. He was not just anybody. He was different.

With his money it had always been easier to arrange spectacular gestures than to force himself through the hard work necessary for more constructive achievements, and the substitutes had been just as satisfying to his ego. This habit of thought persisted even in planning his own death.

Verne Harris was an obscure junior engineer at one of Carlin Industries' minor branch plants. A confidential report rated him as extremely brilliant and original, although somewhat visionary and inclined to overlook commercial possibilities. His very obscurity was one of the reasons he was placed in charge of constructing the spaceship. He could be handled, and the impression would be given in all publicity releases that George Carlin himself was the moving force.

Carlin was annoyed at their first personal interview. Harris appeared fascinated by the technical problems presented and insufficiently impressed by George himself. Carlin felt slighted, but Harris possessed the ability. The only stipulations upon which Carlin insisted were that work be rushed and that all major arrangements should be made through him personally. It pleased him to keep the reins in his own hands.

And so the spaceship went into design and then production, with all other projects of Carlin Industries postponed or cancelled outright. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was allowed to interfere, and money was no object.

Once Harris recommended that three particular specialists be hired to work on the navigation equipment. When Carlin discovered that the men were under exclusive contract to American Calculator Company, which did not wish to release them, he issued orders backed by eighty million dollars. When the flurry of reorganization was over he owned majority control of American Calculator and took revenge for the slight delay by instituting policies that soon forced the other directors into bankruptcy.

Seven months later the ship lay in its launching rack on the Arizona desert. It was sleek and relatively small, built to carry a single man and fuel for a one-way trip to the moon, with oxygen and supplies to last five weeks. Harris had performed miracles of design, including several intricate devices intended to insure a not-too-rough landing, and in the nose compartment was stored a huge folding reflector and high-intensity light which could be set up and operated from the ship's electron-displacement power packs. Trajectory and power settings had been worked out and set up in the automatic control equipment.

The ship was intended to land in the dark of the moon, as Harris had calculated it would be easier to generate heat than to dissipate it on an airless surface.

Harris tried to explain to Carlin why he had not used the almost unlimited power of nuclear fission in the driving rockets. No shield against the deadly radiations had been devised and a human would have lived less than five minutes. But Carlin had not been interested. He lacked a technical education, and he was quite content that the ship was incapable of a round trip. It was more spectacular that way.

There had been a tremendous barrage of publicity throughout the construction period, but all of it dealt with Carlin Industries or George Carlin himself. Not a single public mention of Verne Harris had been made.

Carlin had spent those seven months alternating between prolonged drinking bouts and periods of flogging his organization to ever more frantic activity. Anything to avoid thinking. And it required increasingly clever and time-consuming use of cosmetics to hide the progress of his disease. Concealment was a compulsive psy-

chological necessity, for Matson's Disease was so common, so plebeian, that he felt deeply ashamed. More and more he insisted upon being entirely alone, afraid his secret might be discovered, conducting his affairs by telephone and radio.

THEN one evening, with the ship awaiting only final loading, Harris drove over from the technicians' camp to the luxurious desert villa which Carlin had caused to be built near the launching site. The two men had come face to face only half a dozen times.

It was a thinner, older-looking Verne Harris than the young engineer who had accepted the assignment with such enthusiasm, and the haggard lines in his face showed the almost inhuman lengths to which he had driven himself.

"Arrangements for the liquid oxygen are complete and I'll be ready to blast off next Tuesday morning, right on schedule," the engineer opened the interview. "I came over to thank you for the wonderful opportunity you are giving me, and I promise you, sir, that I shall make the most of it."

Carlin came out of his chair with a roar. "You don't think you are going to take that ship out?" he bellowed.

Verne looked profoundly shocked. No words had passed between them about who was to handle the vessel and Harris had assumed unquestioningly it would be he. It was only logical. Carlin had been smart enough to let him think that way, knowing that thus he would receive Harris' greatest efforts.

"Then who is?" the engineer asked.

"Me. I'll take it myself. That's why I had it built."

Harris looked incredulous. "But why?"

Carlin did not believe he owed him any explanation—he was receiving a fair salary—but something, perhaps a couple of drinks, made him speak.

"The ship is my way out," he said. "A way by which I shall be remembered. I have Matson's Disease."

If he had expected sympathy he was disappointed.

"So have I," Harris announced. "Can't you see?"

Carlin could, now that his attention was called to it. That subtle softening of the lines . . .

A flush spread across Harris' hollowed cheeks and his eyes took on an almost maniacal glitter.

"Look here, you. To you this is just a great big childish show-off trick. Like those people who hesitate and draw a big crowd before jumping from some tall building. And it will accomplish just about as much. You'll either louse up the controls and crash, or else you'll have enough liquor aboard to stay in a drunken stupor until your oxygen runs out."

Carlin, livid at those outrageously disrespectful words, tried to break in as Harris continued in mingled pleading and fury.

"My God, man, don't you see what this means? This is the first spaceship ever built without scrimping and cutting expenses. This one will reach the moon *without crashing*. Why do you think I had it equipped with all sorts of scientific instruments? And why do you think I put so much thought into that light-flash communicator?"

A thought came to him. "Good Lord, you probably don't even know Morse!" he said disgustedly.

Carlin spluttered.

"I had planned a definite program of investigation," Harris continued. "Physical studies of the moon's surface, astronomical observations without atmospheric interference, collection of experimental data that could forward the progress of space-flight by at least a century. And you, an untrained individual who knows nothing but money, would throw away that chance merely to satisfy your ego!"

Carlin looked thoughtful and made a few remarks about reconsidering the matter. He could be extremely sly and devious when that would gain his ends, and Verne Harris was completely taken in.

But Carlin was taking no chances on having his show spoiled by some pipsqueak engineer he could buy and sell ten thousand times over. It was easy enough, with his money and influence, to have Harris adjudged insane and quietly committed to an asylum. The matter was attended to the next morning.

Carlin spent the night before blast-off alone in his desert villa. He had given orders not to be disturbed under any circumstances, so he was not informed that

Harris had escaped. And he had enough drinks during the evening to miss the sound of a window catch being jimmied and the tiptoeing footsteps behind him.

Only when the hypodermic needle plunged into the muscles of his neck did he know anything was amiss, and then it was too late.

HE AWOKE five days later in a hot and dingy furnished room in a near-by city. His clothes were strange, cheap, and did not fit. In his pockets was a large roll of money—and nothing else. Even the signet ring had been removed from his finger. He was ravenously hungry, and after a period of indecision he went out in search of a restaurant.

Less than a block away he passed a newsstand.

"CARLIN LANDS ON MOON!" the headlines screamed. Almost the entire front page was devoted to the story, and several inside pages recounted in greatest detail how George Carlin had come out to his ship alone, his body taped and encased in a bulky pressure suit, mumbled a "no comment" which had produced a deeper impression than any elaborate speech, waved once to the huge throng that had gathered, and then left Earth in a blast of flame while every telescope in the hemisphere swiveled to follow his flight.

George Carlin walked into a liquor store and pointed to a very superior brand of whisky. "Give me a bottle. No, make it two."

Then he went back to the room in which he had awakened. He had no place else to go. For the hundredth time he searched himself for some proof of identity, and for the hundredth time found nothing. For hours he sat with his head in his hands, trying to think of something to do. Finally he opened the second bottle.

Next day the headlines read, "CARLIN REPORTS LIFE ON MOON."

George Carlin had no cosmetics with which to hide the increasingly visible ravages of his illness. He bought a supply of food as well as liquor and did not emerge for another six days. Thus he missed the period in which the world waited with bated breath for further news from the moon. It was during this time that a spontaneous wave of mass emotion

swept the world and George Carlin became a hero. The grasping, evil deeds of the organization he headed—and they were numerous—were forgotten. No publicity staff could have produced such a reaction.

"CARLIN BELIEVES DISCOVERED CURE FOR MATSON'S DISEASE!" The newspapers brought out their largest type and public acceptance verged on hysteria.

Reports from the moon were carefully condensed, for the power available from the electron-displacement packs was strictly limited and every flicker of light must be made to count. Carlin did not even sign his name but all the world knew who he was.

The story, as pieced out and expanded by the news services, was this: On the moon Carlin had found creatures resembling the terrestrial louse. They looked like insects but they were of an entirely different chemical structure and their metabolism was suited to their airless surroundings. Their food was apparently any metal or ore.

While he was engaged in setting up the reflector, working in darkness and terrible cold, one of these tiny creatures had climbed the leg of the pioneer's armored suit and punctured it, eating its way through the metal shell and rubberized fabric liner. Only hasty application of an emergency patch had prevented disaster from loss of air.

The man had fun to the shelter of his ship, but before he could remove his armor the alien creature had bitten him on the upper leg. There had been excruciating pain from the venom the thing injected, and a large ulcer had since developed.

But, the dots and dashes reported, the course of Matson's Disease had been not only arrested but reversed. His bones were hardening again. Perhaps under proper conditions the venom might . . .

It was the first hint that the pioneer had been suffering from the deadly plague, and public sympathy and fascination multiplied.

George Carlin bought more whisky.

Two days later the light on the moon winked again. A rough analysis of moon-louse venom showed it to be a complex pseudo-protein, with silicon substituting

for carbon and chlorine for oxygen.

There followed a series of recommendations that set the press and radio of the world completely wild. There was almost no questioning of the wisdom of the voice from the moon, only acceptance and enthusiasm that swept aside all hesitation.

Within hours the leading governments of Earth had pooled their resources in one gigantic effort. The officers of Carlin Industries accepted the message as a command from the owner and all personnel who had had anything to do with construction of the first spaceship were assigned to supervisory and coordinating positions.

Fifteen spaceships were to be built at top speed, and each was to carry to the moon as much excess fuel as it could lift. There all fuel would be transferred to one ship, which would return with a supply of living moon-lice.

Thousands of welders were at work on the plates of a huge, hermetically sealed laboratory building, while an army of machinists prepared the vacuum pumps and huge refrigerating machines that would reproduce lunar conditions for the alien creatures, and special laboratory equipment was being assembled.

But George Carlin knew little of all this.

ONE more message flashed from the moon. The pioneer was dying. His Matson's Disease had been cured but the ulcer was spreading into vital areas. However, he suggested, tiny doses of diluted venom, administered over a long period of time, might . . .

The message ended in the middle of a word as through their telescopes astronomers saw a great flare go up from the moon's surface, a thousand times brighter than the communications light.

The explanation was self-evident. Electron displacement power packs were treacherous. When their stored power reached a certain minimum level they became highly explosive. The pioneer had sacrificed his remaining days of life to transmit vital information to the world which had given him birth.

Everything stopped for a day and night as the entire civilized world went into deepest mourning for the man who had died 238,840 miles away—everything but

work on the fleet of spaceships. That did not even falter.

George Carlin gave up his rented room, bought a car, and drove across country to the Midwestern city housing the headquarters of Carlin Industries.

He did not get past the outer offices. Carlin Industries had been forced long before to develop a system for handling cranks and crackpots, and it operated only too well. Matson's Disease had made such changes in Carlin's features that he was not recognized. At last he was forcibly ejected.

That was his final effort. He had become a nonentity, a nobody, and so he wanted only to die. But with his identity he had lost his nerve. He did, however, have enough money to avoid drawing even one sober breath.

It is history how nine rockets reached the moon, transferred their remaining fuel, and one finally returned bearing a cargo of living moon-lice as a gift beyond all price. The frantic medical campaign, during which two thousand victims of Matson's Disease had their deaths hastened as doctors sought the proper dosage, is also history.

But then there was a cure—and another—and still more. The treatment became standardized as means were found for stabilizing the venom and controlling its potency. The government assumed charge, and every citizen afflicted with the plague was not only entitled to treatment but compelled to take it.

When the health officers found George Carlin in his isolated cabin he was almost dead. His skeleton had softened to such an extent that he could not stand, and could crawl across the dirty, littered floor only with the greatest difficulty. His atrophied muscles had almost nothing against which to work, and malnutrition and alcoholism complicated the case.

After six months in a sanitarium bed he had recovered enough to become bored. He borrowed a book from the man in the next bed and was disappointed to find it an advanced treatise on rocket fuels. But he read it through and surprised himself by becoming interested.

Still flat on his back, unable to move,



he began an intensive course of study. He had been so nearly boneless when admitted, one of the most advanced cases to survive, that the complete cure took three and a half years.

When he was finally released he had learned enough to obtain a minor job as technical assistant—under an assumed name—in the Carlin Institute For Research which had replaced the old Carlin Industries. He has been there fourteen years now, trying to compensate for lack of brilliance by earnest effort and long hours.

He still has one dream. He hopes some day to stand on a barren, airless spot marked by twisted fragments of a spaceship. And he hopes Verne Harris' spirit still hovers there to hear his apologies.

He has long since given up trying to have his story believed. The myth is too deeply embedded in the public consciousness, and no one has ever heard of Verne Harris. Even the history books teach the children that George Carlin was the first man to reach the moon alive. The last time he attempted to tell the truth he was excoriated as an evil-minded muckracker, probably insane, and received a fractured nose at the hands of an irate listener for maligning a world hero. So he has surrendered to the inevitable.

How do I know all this?

Once I was George Carlin.

Valkyrie From The Void

By **BASIL WELLS**

HARDAN SYNNE REINED IN his graceful golden-furred *maar* as he reached the rim of the river's low bluff. He was uncomfortable, for the *varth*-padded garments that covered his naked body were growing dry, but tied to his huge hornless saddle were three fat Dryland birds. He would eat well tonight.

The rough fare of cereals and preserved fish had palled. Five years of roaming the blistering plains and mountains with

sun-hardened prospectors and hunters had given Hardan Synne a taste for Dryland flesh. So it was that he quitted the camp when the day's trek was done and rode out in search of game.

The *maar*'s long black ears cupped forward, searching the source of some discordant sound. Hardan's keen green eyes snapped back to the reality of the camp sprawling half-in, half-out of the muddy bluish river.

Men were fighting, fists and clubs



Staggering under the blasting heat of a great ringed sun, she fought only to cross her savage slimy world. The lithe Priestess Ylda knew not that her goal lay, bright and shining, a thousand light-years away.



His swords bit deep, drinking their lives.

smashing into the down-furred flesh of their fellows. The sound of their enraged bellowing and the shrill screams of pain and agony grew louder even as he forced his mear down the steep path to the bluff's base.

"Nitka Porn again," Hardan Synn spat out savagely as the blue dust swirled about him. "Always he seeks to stir up trouble among the *sarifs*."

His sun-darkened face was a gaunt mask as he neared the river, but his slitted green eyes were hot with growing rage. He could not leave the eighty great wagons with their cargoes of two hundred Wetlanders and their meager supplies for

so short a time as a *turvy* of the water dial without trouble arising.

Hardan sprang off his mount and elbowed his way into the thick of the melee, his broad hard shoulders teasing soggy-padded men aside. His hard fists smashed one scowling-faced Wetlander's nose, and then he was through into the rude square formed by the inner ring of six-wheeled wagons.

"Nitka Porn!" he shouted, his voice a knife-thrust of sound above the tumult.

The fighting men separated slowly, some weaving on their legs unsteadily, bleeding, and others kneeling and groaning. A half dozen, most of them wearing

the short green capes of the nobles' personal servants, sprawled limply in their own reddish-brown blood.

From one of these unmoving bodies a huge-bodied man, his brutal jaws masked by a hush of fiery red whiskers and his broad nose segmented by a sword-cut's diagonal scar, rose. Half his protective shell of faded blue cloth stuffed with vurth was ripped away from his shoulder and chest. Great muscles knotted there in his swiftly dehydrating pink flesh. He snarled at Hardan.

"The Drylander arrives," he jeered, and laughed.

From the hard-packed blue clay of the camping place he picked an arm-long stake of wood. He waved it derisively at Hardan.

"Watch him shiver," he roared. "When he is well beaten I will drive him from the camp. Then I will lead."

Hardan's stomach knotted—and then dissolved into a glowing spot of fire. His fingers hit into the leather handles of his twin short swords. He had no eyes for the grinning minority clustered about Nitka Porn. Nor did he see the puzzled empty faces of the other trekkers, the slow-minded plodding sarifs caught in this bloody trailside struggle.

"You stand alone against us all," snarled Nitka Porn, swaggering forward, his muddy green eyes slitted watchfully. "The Consars are dead, swimming in their fine wagon tanks for the last time. Their wagons and riding maars are ours now."

Hardan caught his breath on that. This was disaster!

"Fools," he said, his voice loud and sharp, "you know the price of any rebellion. The Consars will track you down. For many it will be the crushing death."

Even as he spoke his eyes never left those of the red-whiskered killer he fronted. In a moment the giant sarif would charge forward, his club swinging and the long curved sword of a dead lord in his other hand.

Hardan sprang to meet him, swords bared and gleaming. Perhaps with the death of Nitka Porn the revolt would collapse...

The stake caught him squarely on the shoulder. His left-hand sword dropped,

tripping him. He caught himself, warded off a whistling slash of the huge curved blade of the sarif, and leaped backward. His left shoulder was numbed, his arm dangling limp as a blasted *netho* leaf in the noonday sun.

Hardan's sword darted in and out, flickering in the hazy sunlight. Blades clashed, slithered apart and the good steel rang clear as bells tinkling. Blood leaked through the pierced blue cloth of the sarif's vurth-padded garment in a half-dozen places.

His arm was tingling with reviving life. Through a red mist of hate Hardan fought with a cool machine-like series of lightning-swift lunges that ripped the sarif's skin into myriad reddish-brown furrows. Hatred was there, yes, but so controlled that it added strength to his sword arm and length to his blade.

The long curved sword flipped abruptly away into the faceless mass of the ringed trekkers. Nitka Porn pawed at his dripping knuckles, his mouth squared, his eyes bulging. He lunged backward, the men parting before his blind rush. And Hardan followed, his eyes hot.

"Kill him . . . Mika, Garnd . . . Don't let him . . . No . . . Mercy!" begged the great coward, his hands before his face.

Hardan poised his keen blade for the death thrust.

"No," he swore angrily, "by Ung Roth, I have not the heart for killing this foul *blast*."

He rammed the sword into the clay. His fists swung hard, all the unleashed loathing and disgust of weeks past in their calculated blows, and Nitka Porn went down emptily, to quiver and lie still.

Hardan retrieved his swords, wiping the stains off on the unconscious hulk's ribboned cloth. He faced the sullen Wetlanders.

"I take over again," he announced. "Back to Apsa we go. It's but two days' trek. There the guilty will be punished before I guide you to Lake Gron."

DANDU MOT, a gray-maned sarif, stepped forward. "No," he said simply. "We will not go back. The innocent would die with the guilty. And our children and women would be driven out

of the settlement stripped of even our poor store of tools and food."

Hardan frowned. Dandu Mot was right. The justice of the Consars on the frontier was severe. They would make of this revolt a lesson for all that might follow along the arid dusty way from Wetland to Wetland. Even he, as guide and leader of the wagon train, might be killed.

The old man came closer, his faded green eyes pleading.

"We did not wish to revolt," he said. "It was Nitka Porn and his men who murdered the Consars. Perhaps beyond the Malsalm Range other Wetlands lie..."

His voice trailed off. Hardan's eyes swept over the oddly assorted throng of sarifs and craftsmen, poor oppressed men seeking a new and freer life beyond the Drylands. Could he see these sad-faced women made widows needlessly? And what of the young ones, their soft peltas as yet devoid of the scantiest of silky fur?

"I must yield," he said soberly. "And beyond the eastern uplands there does lie a sea. Only one Wetlander has ever looked upon it—Jaff Ka!" He paused. "By the grace of Ung Roth and Zo Aldan we may win through."

"There are Drylanders?"

Hardan nodded. "Drylanders who hide in watered valleys and war on all who venture there. Strange monsters, demons of Thog Molog, so say the Drylanders, lurk in the darkness to kill. And winged *soraps* that carry off half-grown children and woolly blades."

"You know the way?"

"I have ridden across the Plateau of Fire to the Plains of Nild, Dandu Mot, but never to the Bitter Sea. But Jaff Ka told me the way."

"So let it be," said the old sarif, stroking his blistered cheek thoughtfully. "And, if we die in the Drylands—we at least die free!"

He turned to his followers. "Seize the followers of Nitka Porn and bind them. Tonight we will try them."

Swords and knives flashed. Clubs smashed and battered, and a moment later seven groaning men were led away. Four others of the red-bearded sarif's followers would walk no more, anywhere.

Hardan turned sharply on his heel and headed for the two wagons of the priests of Ung Roth Ka. His dehydrated body cried out for a soaking in the built-in tank in the wagon's middle. Only by frequent immersions and water-soaked outer shells of cloth could the Wetlanders endure the arid wastelands for more than a few hours.

A line of wounded, bruised men were already at the wagon, the two priests in their hooded orange cloaks attending to their hurts. And with the priests worked their gentle-faced wives, the priestesses of Zo Aldan Ra, the god's beloved mate. Hardan's blood pounded fast as he caught a glimpse of the white-robed novice, Yida Rusla, bearing a steaming basin of water in her dainty hands.

"Hardan!" cried the girl, her soft green eyes lighting up, "you escaped death! You will take us back to Tarn — to safety?"

The frontiersman smiled down at the lithe full-breasted woman facing him. Even the soggy vurth-padded garments and the coarse white robe could not conceal the perfection of her body and face.

He shook his head.

"We go into the Malsalm Range," he told her, "and beyond."

"Not even to Lake Gron!" Yida's face was ghastly. "But, I must—surely you could send me back."

"Sorry," Hardan muttered, "but you cannot leave us now. The wagon train must disappear—as though the Drylanders had attacked and destroyed it."

THE girl's eyes flamed. "I command you to take me back to Aba!" Her foot stamped down imperiously.

"Yida, believe me, I would if it were possible. But the lives of us all depend on absolute secrecy. No word of this train must ever reach the Consars of Tarn."

Yida's small chin lifted and she turned her back, the hot water slopping down across her robe. She headed blindly back toward the wagons. Hardan shrugged, an empty pit in his middle. Any hope that he might win the beautiful novice from her devotion to Zo Aldan Ra was gone now.

He hurried past the wagons and down

the blue clay slope to the fresh waters of the Gron River. For the moment he wanted no conversation with the priestly healers of the wagon train—or anyone else...

II

HIS BODY SOAKED LUXURIOUSLY in the shady pool beyond a looming jut of reddish granite. Were his lungs drinking in the moist richness of the Upper Sea, the vurth-maintained mistiness above the true seas of Osar, he might have thought he was back in Tarn.

The Wetlands of Tarn were a handful of islands and a narrow thirty-mile-wide strip of foggy tropical plains and forests along the true sea of Tarn. Over the sea and back over the mainland extended the upper sea, a false sea of floating aerophyte growth, tenuous and frothy as spun threads of silvery moonbeams; yet capable of retaining a vast amount of moisture and warmth.

For almost a mile it extended upward, its delicate tendrils touching the restless sea and the fertile moistness of the land alike to draw life from them. It offered no resistance to the passage of men or ships; yet it shielded them from the harshness of the vast ringed sun of Osar.

And here four million Wetlanders lived and built their dank massive-walled cities. Half of them were Tarns, ruled by the Council of Consars, and across the vastness of the Tarn Sea four other smaller kingdoms fought and squabbled over their narrow strips of vurth-shielded Wetland.

The land was overcrowded and so it came about that a few hardy adventurers pushed out into the Drylands. At first they followed the rivers, their bodies slowly toughening to the actinic rays of the direct sunlight, and later they struck out into the unknown dryness of grassy plains and deserts. They fought the huge apish Drylanders and ate the hairless horned ulfo of the plains and the woolly blads of the barren hills...And they found Lake Gron, where a large central island offered new homes for thousands of impoverished Consars and their sarifs.

So it was that endless series of wagon trains, drawn by domesticated Dryland beasts, maars and ulfos, pushed up the

Aba River, and the Gron River beyond the dam at Aba, to the upland lake. And the hardy men of the frontier guided them—even as Earthmen ten centuries before, and a thousand light years distant, had guided their effete Eastern countrymen into the Rockies and beyond...

Hardan stirred at last and climbed, refreshed, from his pool. Darkness had come and a dozen fires blazed merrily within the ringed double walls of the roofed wagons. He gathered up his weapons and clothing, wearing only the thin inner jerkin and trunks against the dryness of the night air, and went to the wagons.

Before dawn the wheels were rumbling and grinding up over the rock-strewn ridge above the river headed out into the eastern grasslands. The sleeping tanks, where the Wetlanders slept on moist elevated pads of vurth, were full and the spare water tanks were loaded as well. A dry trek of three, possibly four, days lay ahead of them before they could reach the eastward branching of the Aba River.

Hardan and three of the young sarifs stayed behind as the train moved away, readying the ten oldest wagons and the discarded equipment for the fire that was to help cover their tracks. Later parties of Wetlanders would find the ashes of wagons and the fire-blasted skeletons of men beside the trail and presume this had been a massacre by the apish barbarians of the plains.

"I wish the council of sarifs had ordered the death of Nitka Porn last night," said a blocky young sarif uneasily. "If they escape during the night there will be trouble."

Hardan touched his torch to the wagon they approached. The others were already ablaze. Together they swung into the saddles of their snorting maars. Only then did he speak.

"Yes, Malth Jed," he agreed. "It seemed to me that the council feared Nitka's wrath even though he was a prisoner. For that reason I advised Dandu Mot to double the guard."

"There was light from the fires last night," argued Malth Jed. "Why wait for daylight to slice their necks?"

"I do not believe all Porn's followers are prisoners," Hardan said grimly.

"They may hope to free Nitka Porn and recapture the wagon train. Any delay would help that plot."

"Fools," grunted Malth Jed shortly. "The red-bearded one would turn on them even as he turned on the Consars."

By this time the other two sarifs had joined them on the rim of the bluff above the river. The wagons blazed up brightly, their sun-dried wood and cloth burning fiercely. With the morning sun only a smoking huddle of ashes and twisted metal would remain.

Hardan reined away from the bluff. They made too perfect targets against the illumination of the fire. But suddenly he arrested the little party's advance with a hiss of warning.

FROM the pale darkness before them the sound of distant shouts and shrieks came to them. The caravan was being attacked—or the outlaw sarifs had been freed!

"Spread out," Hardan commanded tensely, "as we reach the wagons. That way we will present a poorer target."

He dug his heels into the maar's sleek sides and they galloped forward along the rutted broad track of the wagon train.

The fighting had ended by the time they traversed the half mile gap that lay between them. The wagons were halted in a jumbled confused S-shaped tangle in the growing dawn. Only a sullen silence greeted them, but they saw dark movement against the slant-roofed bulk of the wagons.

"Hold!" warned Hardan. "Let me ride forward. It may be a trap."

And then, from a clump of wagons further along the snaking train, a maar and rider pounded out into the grasslands and headed in their direction. A man shouted something, and a confused chorus of yells answered him. After the lone rider a dozen other mounted men raced.

"It's a woman!" Malth Jed grunted, his bow ready in his thick fingers. "The white-robed novice of Zo Aldan Ra."

"Then they've overcome Dandu Mot and freed the red-bearded one," Hardan muttered, readying his own weapons.

The girl rode swiftly closer. The four riders went to meet her, their swords

loosened in their sheaths and their spears in their hands. Only Malth Jed relied on his heavy hunting bow as a weapon; the others preferred throwing spears and swords.

"Hardan!" shrieked Ylda, "behind you!"

The frontiersman twisted in his saddle, a throwing spear grazed his wurtth-padded shoulder, and he found himself facing the hate-twisted features of the two sarifs who had accompanied him. The strength of Nitka Porn in the wagon train must have been considerable, he thought ruefully, as he crossed swords with the lanky sarif on his left.

The sarif was no swordsman, the cowardly spear had been his only hope, and even as he turned his terrified eyes briefly toward his fellow an arrow bristled from the other sarif's throat. He shrieked and hurled his sword at Hardan even as he dug his heels into the maar's flanks. He went racing away, blood streaming from his sword-pierced upper arm.

Malth Jed reined closer. "Wound you?" Hardan shook his head.

"They killed Dandu Mot—many others—one of the holy healers who rebuked them—and now they loot the wagons." The girl's lips quivered as she spoke breathlessly.

"I guess you get your wish now, Ylda Rush," he said grimly. "We ride back to Aba to ask for troops to pursue Nitka Porn."

Further conversation was impossible. The first pursuers, augmented now by a score or more of men on foot, were upon them. Spears and arrows were dropping around them as they wheeled their maars about to escape.

Ylda's maar went down, squealing horribly, a spear in her belly, and the girl was hurled over her mount's head into the tangled coarseness of the yellow ulfo grass. Before Hardan could swing back to scoop the unconscious body of Ylda from the ground their pursuers had reached her and surrounded her.

Hardan rode into them, hewing and slashing with his twin swords, letting his maar move as she willed. Blood splashed and spurted before his maddened blows, and the rebellious sarifs fell back momentarily. Ylda screamed. He saw a sarif on

foot hoist the girl's struggling form to a mounted man, a huge-bodied redbear, and the rider's fist smashing down at the juncture of rounded neck and fragile jaw.

Ylida went limp as Nitka Porn's blow landed and then the outlaw rode away, waving a derisive fist at Hardan across the hulk of mounted men and attacking sarifs on foot.

He was battling for his life a second later. A spear found his body, and then another. Arrows hailed upward at him, piercing his padded limbs and drawing blood. In a moment he would be overpowered. Yet he fought on, trying to break through the press of rebel sarifs to pursue Ylida's captor.

"Hardan," a terrible voice roared above the shouts of his attackers, "escape... Outnumbered!"

A spark of sanity remained in his weary brain. And the words of Malth Jed fanned it into life. His swords hissed, carving out a momentary gap, and he sent his maars plunging back the way they had come. He saw Malth Jed, sagging in his saddle, racing before him, and even as he watched a feathered shaft jutted abruptly from between his shoulderblades.

The stocky sarif slumped forward, dinging in his death agony to the saddle, and so they rode away into the growing daylight of the Drylands — a wounded cursing Wetlander and a jouncing bundle of dead sinews and bone that had once been a man...

TWO hands of days had passed before Hardan dared leave the sheltered cave beside the Gron River not far from the ashes of the abandoned wagons. The two maars had pastured in a grassy hidden ravine and there too had he buried the stocky body of Malth Jed.

Then he had taken up the trail of the wagons again, and, despite the soreness of his half-healed wounds, come up with them in a matter of three days riding. He found them camped at the Isr River junction.

So now he lay on his belly in the early twilight, peering down into the rough circle of wagons, his eyes searching for the white-robed form of the girl he loved.

At last he saw her with one of the

priests and a priestess sitting beside a small cooking fire apart from the others. But she no longer wore the garb of a novice. Instead she wore the green cloak of a Consar over her bulky vurtth-stuffed coverings. A moment later he saw that her legs were linked by a short length of chain, riveted to either ankle by a cuff of metal. And across the fire squatted an armed man, a guard.

Hardan was puzzled at her change of garb, but his blood pounded with joy as he saw her apparently unharmed and well-fed. With the coming of darkness he could rescue her, and, Ung Roth willing, the priests and their wives as well.

So he set out looking for a concealed pathway to the river's edge and a thousand feet further downstream came upon a sheer gorge cut into the clay and soft gray rock of the bluff. Down this he lowered himself and in the increasing gloom made his way to the river and submerged.

He swam upstream, silent as a hunting *prol*, his only weapons his two swords. His spear and the excess garments he had left on the little sunken bowl of grass where his maars grazed.

Like a great Dryland Ape of the woodlands he crept up from the water at last, his only shelter the waist-high clumps of ulfo grass that dotted the river's shingly bank. And he won at last inside the carelessly guarded ring of wagons to the small fire where Ylida sat silently and stared into the flames.

From the shelter of a great double-spoked wheel he studied the camp. Well for the fleeing sarifs, he thought, that no raiding party of Drylanders had come to attack. He heard them quarreling and shouting drunkenly, and saw their swords and other weapons heaped carelessly beside the fires as they ate and caroused.

The guard spat impatiently into the fire and ran a dry tongue over his parched lips. Longingly he studied the growing excitement at the center of the encampment. There was nothing to do here, only the priest and priestess discussing the strange healing property of a vegetable mold recently discovered in Tarn. He slapped his hip, cursed roughly, and climbed to his feet.

"Don't stir from the fire," he ordered

Ylda fiercely. His tongue poked thirstily at his lips.

The guard swaggered away from the fire toward the curtain-hung rear of the wagon just ahead. This wheeled canvas-and-wood shack had a sagging roof sloping from a central ridge to either end of the box so that a sort of awning covered the low rear entrance. He reached inside and when his arm emerged a basket-woven jar was in his hand, its inner earthenware lining containing a sloshing fluid.

Hardan scented the raw reek of alcohol, of garack, as he crept closer. The guard's thick lips smacked, he rubbed a rasping fist across his mouth and snorted appreciatively. Then the jar tilted again, gurgled.

The guide sprang, his fingers clamping about the startled throat of the sarif. He squeezed hard, choking back the gasp of terror, and the jug crashed to the hard ground. Then his fist chopped in a short vicious punch to the sarif's neck that felled the man.

He trussed the sarif swiftly with his own filthy brown cape, stuffing a generous handful into the gaping mouth, before he crossed to the fire and squatted in the guard's place.

Ylda came to her feet, hand to her mouth.

"Hardan!" She came toward him jerkily, the chain making her take mincing, careful steps.

"Sit down," he told her. "And warn your friends to keep their places." The priest and the priestess smiled quietly.

"Fear nothing from us," they told him. "Our calling is to heal the bodies and minds of the sick. It was for that mighty Ung Roth Ka came from the greater of the four moons to dwell among men. We care nothing for the quarrels and jealousies of men."

"Though," added the priestess, "as a woman and not a servant of Zo Aldan Ra, I hope you escape safely."

The priest nodded, his eyes twinkling. "We are yet only human. Though we will not use violence yet we can give advice and appeal to our mighty master in your behalf."

Hardan bowed, his hand making the respectful sign of a believer on the great

god of healing. "I will bind you before we leave," he said, "unless you will come with us."

The priest shook his head. "There are many sick and fearful in the train," he said, "we remain to aid them."

Hardan turned to Ylda. "After I break your chain slip beneath the wagon and through the grass to the river. I will follow."

He arose and came over to her as though to examine her bonds. His hands clamped the chain and he tested the hand-forged links. One of them twisted and spread apart. Quickly he wrapped a strip of her green cape around either length of chain and her leg.

Ylda slipped away. Hardan busied himself binding the priest and priestess of the only gods and then followed. Almost he had reached the river when the silvery light of the four moons of Osar shone from beneath a pear-shaped cloud above the distant eastern hills.

Instantly the river flats were lighted bright as their beloved Wetlands. And a guard, rousing from his half-sleep in the white brilliance, saw Hardan's moving shape. He cried a warning.

HARDAN knew the need for stealth was gone now. He ran to the river bank where Ylda waited, took her hand, and flung himself out into the sluggish muddy stream. He swam directly across and there, taking her in his arms, headed into the vine-tangled growth of scrub *osso* and knotty *brel*. And at its edge he halted long enough to send a shout of defiance back at the clustering sarifs.

After that he wasted no more breath. Downstream he threaded his way until a crook in the river piled a welcome wall of blue clay and shale between the camp and them. Here he again took to the river and a few minutes later they were running breathlessly across the moonlit plain beyond toward the hidden maars.

"Tricked them that time," chuckled Hardan, saddling their mounts. "We'll circle eastward toward the Blue Malsahms and then head back toward Aha."

Ylda put her slim fingers on Hardan's arm and squeezed. It told him, more than words, that she was happy to have escaped and that as yet she was breathless.

He lifted her into the saddle and then mounted himself. It was so easy now—a day's ride away from the river and then a southward swing until they could head directly westward back toward Aba and the river trail to the Wetlands...

THE rocky escarpment loomed closer and closer as they drove their lathered maars up the boulder-strewn slope. Ylda turned for a hasty glance backward.

"They're gaining, Hardan," she shouted.

"It'll be night soon," Hardan called back, "and the Drylanders fear darkness." But his eyes probed vainly for a way of escape ahead.

His mouth twisted wryly as he recalled his plan of the preceding night. At mid-day a mounted party of the giant Drylanders, savage yellow-haired, apish brutes, had sighted them and for the last five hours they had found safety only in swift flight. Now, unless a gorge or pass opened in the looming grayness of the brown-spotted cliffs, they were trapped at its base.

Already the triumphant scrawling of the Drylanders sounded in their ears as the ape-things fanned out on either hand. Once that curved line pinned them against the cliff they were trapped, to be killed or, if captured alive, saved for sacrifice to the foul god of the Drylands, Thog Molog.

The sheer escarpment loomed higher and more forbidding as they neared it. Hardan felt his chest grow hollow as the last prospect of escape dwindled. All that remained now was to find a vantage point above their pursuers and sell their lives dearly. To be taken alive was unthinkable.

A huge flat-topped boulder shouldered the cliff, its rim twenty feet above the sandy soil, and toward this Hardan led the way. It was a natural fort that they might hold until darkness clamped down.

Hardan rode his maar close up to the rock, where a crevice split several feet diagonally down the face of the boulder, and swung up from the saddle. A moment later he was crouched on the rock helping Ylda to his side.

Their maars moved away only a few paces and started grazing on the sparse-leaved clumps of ossa and brell at the

cliff's base. Hardan turned, facing the cliff, and now he saw an opening in the cliff wall where the boulder's flat rim touched it. It was a low oval of darkness going back deep into the cliff's heart, a cave entrance hid by the great rock.

"In, quickly," he ordered Ylda, "before the Drylanders arrive."

And hardly had they reached that welcome shelter than the huge warriors came thundering up to the cliff.

At sight of the empty saddles the Drylanders growled their amazement, their guttural meager speech carrying excited overtones of superstitious terror. Hardan understood enough of their brutish gabble to learn that they believed their monster god, Thog Molog, had carried them away.

Then keen tiny eyes discovered the flat-roofed boulder and a moment later their shadowy hiding place was discovered. Instantly the hushed mutterings and moans of awe changed to roars of rage. They came swarming up over the rock.

Hardan met them with arrows and spears. The first wave of attackers fell back, only to launch a second and more powerful assault. This time they swung up to the boulder-top together and the Wetlander dropped back into the cave-mouth, his twin swords bared.

The apish giants crouched down and came raging at him, only to be spitted on his flashing blades until the opening was choked with bloody chilling flesh. Their comrades dragged the bodies backward and once the orifice was cleared flung themselves at him again.

His swords bit deep, drinking the life of Drylander after Drylander until at last the assault ceased. Darkness had fallen and the great brutes had lost their stomach for further battle. So they withdrew, taking their dead with them, and built three fires of dry brush and cactus about the uprear of the huge rock.

"And that's that tonight," panted Hardan, wiping his swords mechanically of the blood that smirched their keen blades.

In the darkness Ylda's soft hands ran over his arms and chest searching for wounds. His blood ran hot as her soft flesh met his.

"You're untouched!" she cried, unbelieving.

"Had all the advantage," Hardan

scoffed. "But if we're here when the sun rises again—we won't be so lucky."

Ylida peered out, her eyes reading the purpose of the three fires. Placed so they effectively ruled out any escape in the darkness, the Drylanders on guard would see instantly any movement atop the rock. Her breath caught in her throat and she clung to Hardan's sweat-damp body.

"We'll try the cave," Hardan told her thickly, very conscious of her intimate nearness. "It may have another entrance higher or beyond the cliff."

Roughly he broke away from the girl and started back into the darkness, his swords probing the gloom. And behind him he heard the girl following. The floor was uneven, rough patches of rock, and so, she stumbled before she had come a dozen paces.

After that her hand clung to his crossed sword hilts as the way climbed gradually higher.

Echoes of their passage grew more distant. The cavern roof and walls must be drawing away on all sides. Hardan licked his dry lips and the parched dryness of his vorth-padded body sapped his strength. They halted for a moment to finish the last of their water bags and munch a tough strip of dried ulfo meat before pushing on.

"We must find water soon," whispered Ylida faintly, "or I am finished."

And a short distance further along Hardan felt her fingers slip from their grip on his belt. She lay silent and limp on the rocky floor, her soft skin harsh and dry as the Dryland hills, and her cracked lips moaning.

He lifted her and staggered onward. His years in the Drylands had toughened his flesh and lungs to withstand the arid violence of the grasslands for several hours, but even yet he must sleep in or near water at night. He suffered mightily, his lungs on fire and his throat a dust-rasping channel. Like a man in a grotesque nightmare of torture he felt his wooden limbs move uncertainly far below him.

Only when the stars were above him and he felt the welcome fluidity of water about his parched ankles did he halt and lower the girl. The water was chill but his thirsty body sucked at it greedily.

III

THE HUGE RINGED SUN OF Osar was yet hugging the rim of the ragged Malsalm's peaks to the east when he awoke, shivering despite the thick dampness of his vorth-stuffed covering. Behind him, wedged against the rocky shelf and protected by a down-curving slash of rock, huddled Ylida.

He slipped off his thick shell and heaped it on the girl's sleeping body for additional warmth and stepped out, naked as go the men of the Upper Seas in their moist-walled cities and lush meadows. As yet the sun was not too warm for his sleek-furred flesh.

They had come up from the cliff to a narrow long plateau atop it. A shallow rocky lake was at their feet and a stream came down from a snow-capped peak in the southern distance to feed its chill moistness. Abruptly he remembered the cave and the yellow-haired Dryland giants who trailed them.

A long crevice rifted the floor of the miniature tableland not far from the lake's brim. Perhaps in the rainy season the overflow of the lake found escape there, but now it was dry, a crude staircase dipping down into the gloomy abyss that was the cave they had traversed. Hardan sensed the immensity of the void beneath, the whole cliff must be a honeycomb of caverns and subterranean passages.

The sound of horny bare feet and the rubbing of metal on the leather of harness warned him that the Drylanders had overcome their aversion of the darkness enough to trail them. He caught a glimpse of a moving blob of blackness that could only be them a hundred feet and more below.

Hardan laughed. The rift was walled with heaps of rocky debris, boulders brought down from the poles in glacial eras and sections of splintered igneous rock. He put his arm and shoulder against them and heaved. He sang lustily as he worked.

One after another they fell, the smaller ones entering the crevice and bounding downward to rip the climbing Drylanders from their hold; the others clogging forever the way from below. He rolled a last rounded boulder of green-shot basaltic

origin and turned, hand at his sword.

Ylda was standing there, his vurtth-padded garment's ugliness in her extended hands. She smiled, her eyes warm in the shadow of her wide-rimmed quilted bead-gear of vurtth. Suddenly Hardan was aware of the growing intensity of the morning sunlight parching his down-covered flesh. In his excitement he had forgotten the blistering sun.

He slipped quickly into the coverall-like covering, its dampness doubly welcome after his exposure to the deadly atmosphere of the Drylands, and went with her to the rim of the narrow flat-roofed ridge where they had climbed.

"We can't go back, Ylda," he told her, his hand pointing out the way they had come up across the arid lands from the Isr River.

Ylda's eyes swung northward and then on around to the south again. She shuddered and Hardan sensed her terror of this molten naked hell of tortured rock and waterless slope that bemmed them in.

"We'll follow this stream up to its source," he went on after a moment, "and then find another that flows westward toward the Gron or the Aba. Nothing to it."

The girl's lips twisted in a tremulous attempt at a smile.

"Hardan," she said, "before you start back with me I must tell you why I was held captive by the rebelling sarifs."

Hardan shook his head, his mind raging. There could be only one reason for her to be in chains. Nitka Porn had wanted her and until she would consent to be his woman she might escape. That could be the only truth, he thought, and he wanted to hear nothing about it.

"But I must tell you, Hardan, before you—before we—leave the mountains. I was going to Lake Gron to meet my lover. He is a Consar, Serid Jern."

"Serid Jern!" snapped out Hardan. "That beak-nosed gray-haired old wastrel! You mean you—he was your lover?"

"But let me explain. It's not what you think. There is nothing wrong. He is a Consar and my father..."

"Enough." Hardan jerked her along by the arm, "I wish to hear no more about it. You are young and knew no better.

When we reach Aba I will carry you away in the lawful manner."

Ylda's slight body stiffened and she pulled away from Hardan angrily. "Don't touch me again, ever!" she cried.

Hardan shrugged and beaded off up the lake toward the stream that fed it. If the obstinate little sarif girl wanted to follow him let her. He had almost forgotten that he was born into an impoverished Consar family, these last few years, but now he remembered the vast social gulf between them. Yet he would gladly have given up his rank had Ylda agreed to mate with him.

And now she scorned him. It was as though she were the Consar and he the sarif. The months she must have spent with the priests and priestesses of Ung Roth and Zo Aldan had given her a false conception of a woman's place on Osar.

Let her have her soft-bellied old lover in Gron Lake. She'd get her fill of battling the half-dozen other sarif girls he'd collected there already...

Hardan's knuckles whitened on the handles of his swords, and he cursed all the Serid Jerns of the Wetlands.

ABRUPTLY he came to a halt. Beside the rough trail he followed a peculiar-looking dwarfish creature lay sleeping at the stream's brink. His body was hairless, save on the top of his skull and under his nose and on his cheeks, and he was weaponless save for a short thick bow and a club. A cloak of muddy green covered his tattered unpadded coveralls.

Hardan stirred the sleeping creature with his toe and it sat up. He spoke to it in Tarnish, and in the scanty tongue of the great Dryland Apes. And at this the sunken monkeylike little eyes blinked with a certain measure of intelligence. It rose to its meager six feet of height and faced him.

"I am called Kern Rensom," he cried shrilly. "I am from Aarth," his puny arm made an indefinite circling motion. "Long ago we came to Osar to conquer it all."

Hardan grinned. "Little Drylanders like you better keep hid or the winged soraps will carry you off. You coul'n't lick a couple of bladts."

The little Aarthman's arms and body flashed into movement so swift that Hardan could not see what was happening. He felt himself flying through the air and jolted down a dozen paces away, his breath gone. He heard Ylda's amused laughter, and the sound spurred him to bound to his feet and leap toward the little man.

Ylda cried out in protest—the Aarthman had drawn no weapon but stood with arms folded — and Hardan's pace slowed. He could not run through a man who would not protect himself.

"Take up your club!" he cried savagely, "or one of my swords!"

The little man grinned impishly, his wide mouth red in the uncouth tangle of his scrubby brown whiskers.

"Try to bit me," he invited.

Hardan's anger overcame his scruples. He swung his right hand sword in an arc that would have bit a respectable nick out of the Aarthman's shoulder. And the sword seemed to freeze in midair!

He fought against the paralysis that froze his muscles. Sweat salted his face and body as he threw all his strength into the effort, but he could not stir. Nor could he move his legs or the other arm. After a long moment of struggle he recognized his efforts were useless and ceased his frantic mental commands. And in that instant his body was free again.

"Are you a man or one of the devil-things of Thog Molog?" he demanded fearfully, sheathing his blade.

"I am like yourself, Hardan Synn," said the little man, amused. "But I have mental power that you of Osar cannot comprehend. It is the only weapon of Aarth we are permitted to use."

"You—you called me by name!" Hardan cried out. "Now I know you are of Thog Molog's foul brood. Only a devil-thing could be at once so puny and so hideous."

"You are wrong, Hardan," and now Kern Rensom used words that were a blend of Dryland and Wetland speech. "I can look into your mind and understand what you think. Even now I can tell you that you misjudge Ylda Rusla."

"No!" broke in the girl, "please keep silent, strange man."

Kern Rensom shrugged. "As you wish," he said. He turned to Hardan again.

"Perhaps you can come with me to my home valley before returning to Aba." He laughed at the unspoken refusal in Hardan's brain. "We have a small lake in the crater covered with an upper sea of vurth," he added.

"Why not?" demanded Ylda. "For too long have I breathed the harsh upland air. To move unencumbered through the soft dampness of the vurth sea would be heaven."

Hardan nodded doubtfully. "Very well," he said. "But remember it means the revolting sarifs may escape beyond the Blue Balsams."

"I hope they do," flashed Ylda, "and you do too. Most of the sarifs are good people. Even if Nitka Porn and a few others escape punishment the innocent ones will escape."

"That's settled then." Hardan turned to the Aarthman. "Lead off, Kern Rensom."

AND so they started off eastward across the mountains and bare reddish-veined slopes of the blue ridges, the tiny Aarthman leading. All forenoon they walked, pausing often beside the stream to soak their padded garments and gather the sparse scattering of brown-husked berries from bushes in the sheltered angles of the little watercourse.

Toward noon they left the swift little stream and crossed a steep slope of treacherous yellow shale and broken rock to a slope that carried them down toward a vast sunken bowl, an extinct crater, in whose heart the misty outlines of a small lake nestled grayly. That it was roofed with vurth there could be no question, and thereafter Hardan forgot most of his suspicions that the stranger meant them evil.

"It was there," Kern Rensom said, his finger pointing out a squatty ovoid of darker rock, "that our ship from beyond the stars landed. It was broken, and all save two women and one man died."

"You came from up there?" demanded Ylda. "Then you are of the race of the true gods, Zo Aklan and Ung Roth?"

The Aarthman shook his head. "No, we are mortals, I have read your mind

and learned about your gods. Perhaps your gods, too, were mortals from another world who landed here safely on Osar."

Hardan's ears tingled at such heresy. And yet he was forced to admit what the little man said was logical. He knew that many of the wisest Wetlanders did not believe in Thog Molog and the devil-things, nor did he suppose the Drylanders believed in the power of Zo Aldan and Ung Roth. It was true the two gods had come from the outer moons in a strange metallic ship.

"Why then," he asked, "did you not conquer the Drylands? Was it not for that you came to Osar?"

Kern Rensom tugged at his scrubby beard. "We were too few at first. And when there were a thousand of us we tried to use the weapons and tools we had sealed away, but we had forgotten. All the juice that powered them had seeped away. Nor could we repair them."

"But you have books," insisted Hardan. "They would tell you."

The little man was shamefaced. "While we waited; hunting, building our city, and tilling our fields, we forgot how to read. For many centuries we have lived on a level but little above that of the Drylanders."

Hardan swore with amazement. Despite their wonderful mental power these Aarthmen were little better than ignorant savages. Perhaps if he could bring a few wise men from the Wetlands to this valley and have them work with the Aarthmen they could reconstruct that forgotten language and learn to build ships that flew in the air.

With great ships like theirs the journey from Wetland to Wetland would be simple and all Osar would be opened to them. No longer would they be forced to haul sleeping tanks of water by slow wagons across the dry-grassed plains...

THE TRAIL wound aimlessly, it seemed to Hardan, down into the vast circular abyss of the crater. And after a time, as they neared the lower slopes, he saw the Aarthman scratch his shaggy brown head in apelike fashion, and stop.

"You've lost your way," he told Kern.

Kern Rensom nodded. "I escaped from

a small band of Roons, the Drylanders who dwell on the slopes above our craters, two days ago. I was hunting on the northern side and was forced to circle southward to where you found me."

"But if we continue downward we must come to your city," Hardan said, puzzled. "Why do you hesitate?"

"All Smeth Valley is surrounded by a high wall, Hardan, built by my people. But on the southern inner slope for more than a mile an ancient, higher wall was there. A wall circling down to the lake."

"Since we came to Smeth Valley only a few men have ventured beyond that wall, and of them all only one returned—a madman!"

"You think we are approaching that section then?" Hardan laughed and his hands found comforting grip on his sword hilts. "Nothing could lie beyond there save deserted ruins," he scoffed.

"Perhaps we could walk along the wall's rim," Kern said, disregarding Hardan's laughter, "until we passed the walled-in section. The ridges on either side crowd up to the wall so it would be our only path."

"That'd be better than climbing up again," agreed Hardan.

And so, a dozen tortuous bends in the deepening ravine they followed, later, they fronted the soaring smooth-jointed face of a gigantic wall. At their feet the dry bed of the ravine ended in solid granite, and on either hand the ravine's walls lifted sheer for fifty feet and more.

Try as they would they could not climb the craggy walls. Apparently they were to be forced to return back along the way they had come and find some new path to the lower crater depths.

Yida cried out and pointed to the lower part of the pierced vertical slab set in the wall before them. The scanty flow of freshets here in the uplands had slowly worn away a larger hole, a process that must have consumed unthinkable centuries, until even a Wetland warrior could have wriggled through.

Hardan nodded. He too had seen the opening but did not want to suggest using it. The Aarthman's fantastic tale had affected him more than he cared to admit. Now he knelt down and thrust his head carefully through the orifice.

"Just a grassy slope," he called back, his voice loud with relief. "Down by the lake there's a jumble of rock slabs and columns, could be a city. Not even any trees until the upper sea begins."

He withdrew his head and slid through feet-first, dropping into a deep wide rocky pocket gouged out by the ravening mountain torrents. Ylda followed, slipping into his arms easily, but her face turned away stiffly as he set her on her feet. Hardan growled and turned away, disgusted at the little sarif's continued show of dislike.

"Hurry up, Kern Rensom," he said.

The Aarthman's be-whiskered face appeared. Under that brushy brown stubble his brown skin had paled to a strangely green shade.

"I don't know," he said uncertainly. "The Drylanders claim this is the abode of Thog Molog. I've seen crude pictures of their god. It's a many-armed ghastly monster bigger than a Drylander's communal yod."

HARDAN too sensed the alien silence and remoteness of this close-cropped expanse of sward. Almost he expected to see a flock of the woolly, vari-colored blades grazing there, so close was the brook-watered grass trimmed to its roots. Something, ancient foul things, must lurk in those brooding ruins and come out in the moonlight to eat. No grass could grow so uniform and short.

So they moved together, speaking no more, through the hushed silence of growing dusk, into the shadows of the vast vertical mass of the ancient wall that dipped southward. They searched for a way to scale that soaring obstacle, vainly.

The rim of the upper sea, the false sea that was vurth floating lightly above the true sea far below, they reached and Hardan felt the tingling thrill of a stranger returning home as the delicate moist tendrils contacted his exposed flesh. He heard Ylda's sigh of sensuous ecstasy as she sucked in the dank richness of the confined atmosphere, and he heard the Aarthman breathing unsteadily as though half-choked.

"How you can stand this pea-soup," came the little man's strangled voice, "is beyond me. It's like walking underwater; yet breathing."

Hardan laughed and slipped out of his cumbersome padded garb. Now he could climb the wall or fight more freely. The intangible unseen menace of the walled city and fields now struck him with returned power. He bound the suit into a pack on his shoulders and set about examining the damp and crumbling wall. The moisture had loosened its ancient bonding material and he found many foot and hand holds.

Swiftly he angled upward, his two companions following the way he had found. Once he ran into a section of intact wall and was forced to turn back, and Ylda swung upward along a new series of crevices, leading the way. Hardan now brought up the rear instead of Kern Rensom.

The vurth ended, and even as they saw that less than twenty feet lay between them and the wall's top, a hideous gagging squelching sound, like a mud-wallowing drunkard venting his addled rage, sounded from below.

Hardan turned to look down, his sword in his right hand and his feet jammed in a shallow crack.

A vast bulk, indistinct in the failing light of the vanished sun, and rendered yet more vague by the aerophytic sea that washed around its lower body, reared there. Hardan sensed that the greasily smooth hide, wet and slime-covered, was slate-gray, liberally spotted with patches of ghastly pale yellow. He saw an inner gaping maw, its huge inner jaws covered with bony serrated ridges, and in a deadly fringe about this mouth a score or more of specialized tentacles stretched like multi-jointed arms upward.

"Climb swiftly!" roared Hardan, "while I hold it back."

The tentacles slithered nearer, their gray snaky flesh ending at the tips in sucker-like yellow-tinged discs. Hardan swung his weapon down at the nearest and from the severed tentacle tip a steaming purplish ichor spurted. And with its wound the burbling mouthings from below redoubled.

The Wetlander sprang upward, a questing tentacle brushing his heel as he found a new vantage point several feet higher, and then he sliced through this leathery appendage's tip as well.

But now three of the tentacles wormed together at him, and though his blade slashed off two of them, the third found his naked flesh and the suction discs ripped at him. He clung to the wall, his discarded sword clattering downward, but relentlessly the monster was dragging him from his precarious perch.

He heard a sob at his side and his other sword was drawn from its sheath even as his left hand lost its grip. Then he was released, the tentacle tip yet clinging to his flesh, and he found Ylida tugging at his arm. The Aarthman lowered his bow and Hardan pushed the trembling girl up to him.

A moment later they were all three safe a scant four feet above those questing hungry ropes of flesh, and Ylida was in his arms...

IV

Moonlight silvered white the inner crater when they reached the Aarth city. The gates were closed and Kern Rensom said they would not be opened until the dawn. He guided them to a hunting estate owned by his older brother, a well-to-do Aarthman farmer, that was not far from the upper sea's rim and there they left him.

That night they slept in a soft mound of hastily gathered Wetland moss, the thick wetness of the upper sea closing about them like a warm blanket. And for long Hardan lay awake, his blood singing with the knowledge that Ylida's love was his.

Their escape from the penned-in monster, the Drylanders' fabled Thog Molog, had broken through the barriers of her false pride and she had confessed that she loved him. And she had explained to him that she was really the daughter of a noble landowner who had been courted by the aging Serid Jern against her parents' wishes. She had disguised herself as a sarif girl and joined the priestesses as a novice to reach Lake Gron and her husband-to-be.

"But I am glad I met you, Hardan," she had whispered, "before I mated with him. I could not have really loved him; only the glamour of his wild frontier kingdom attracted me.

"Nor will my father object to my marrying a sarif. He holds that the man himself is of more importance than his rank."

Hardan smiled, before he went to sleep, at the reversal in his position. Now he was the sarif, rather than Ylida. Nor did he intend to tell her of his equal rank until they stood together before her father...

With morning they left the upper sea and with the Aarthman made their way to the city. Here the diminutive men and women made much of them, feasting and dining them, and learning all they could of the Wetland civilization they had never before contacted.

Kern Rensom showed them the buildings where the corroded tools of their ancestors were stored so carefully, and he took them inside the twisted wreckage of the space ship on the slope above the city. Most of all was Hardan interested in the metallic-leaved books and stacks of circular containers of record tape. Here was the secret of the Aarthmen if they but had the key of written words to unlock it.

The pictures interested him as well. The Aarthmen owned several worlds: cloud-swathed, green-clad continents and vorthless broad seas, and a dying red world of deserts. And their sun was a tiny red ball without the least sign of an outer solar ring. How much more beautiful was Osar's generous ringed luminary, thought the Wetlander.

So it was that they spent day after day in the peaceful valley of the Aarthmen, cementing the bonds of friendship that Hardan hoped would release the forgotten knowledge of Aarth for both races. Almost had he forgotten the toiling caravan of huge six-wheeled wagons that even now must be traveling through the waterless desolation of the passes of the Blue Malsahn Range to the north.

"You should be told, Hardan," Kern Rensom said, as the mounted messenger rode off down the broad paved street, "that the wagon train you guided has halted less than a day's journey to the north. And the evil-brained sarif, Nitka Porn, has laid a trap for the small party of soldiers who pursue them."

Hardan's eyes flashed. It was not

enough that Nitka Porn had taken over control of the train. Now he must slaughter more Wetlanders instead of attempting escape. He realized that he must kill the huge-bodied sarif before he could cause any more bloodshed and misery. Perhaps there was yet time to rescue the doomed warriors.

"One of our hunters crept close enough to the wagon train to catch the thoughts of Nitka Porn," the little man was saying. "The attack is to be late today or in the morning."

"Kern Rensom!" cried Hardan, "could you get me a guide and maars to take me to the soldiers?"

"I can do better," grinned the Aarthman. "I can come along. And bring a score of warriors as well."

Hardan took his sword-belts down from their pegs and buckled them on. He looked to his bow and replaced the somewhat frayed string. Then he strode out the door to where the maars they had ridden earlier in the morning were kept. And with him walked the little Aarthman, clean-shaven now and dandified in embroidered blouse and wide-bottomed trousers of woven blue fabric. He too was hooking on his harness of knives, arrow quiver, and throwing club.

They mounted, pulling their desert robes from behind the saddles—this last was an Aarth invention that shielded them from sun glare and stinging sand flurries—and rode toward the poorer section of Smeth City where hunters and warriors lived. Nor were they long in recruiting a force of thirty mounted men and leaving the city behind.

Yet as they reached the great gate in the towering outer wall, the wall that barred the lower crater to any but Aarthmen, a wide-hatted rider with desert robes high about his face, awaited them. And as they filed through the narrow slot the sliding gate-slab permitted this rider to join the party.

Hardan rode close to the stranger and uncovered the shielded features. He shrugged and shouted across to Kern Rensom.

"I might have known," he laughed. "It is Ylida."

"Why should I not go?" she demanded. "Perhaps it is my father or my brother who commands the soldiers. They were

to be assigned to the Aba River command this term."

"So!" Hardan nodded. "You tire of us and wish to go with them. Or perhaps you wish to find them so we can mate."

The high color that flooded Ylida's downy haired cheeks was answer enough. Her chin elevated proudly, but she said nothing. And Hardan too hoped her father was serving his year, every sixth year a Consar was supposed to enter the armed forces of Tarn, for that much the sooner could they be mated.

THROUGH the gate they rode and up increasingly dry barren slopes until they reached the jumbled hell of ridges, splintered crevices, and ragged gorges that lay above the crater's rim. They rode through the midday heat, pausing but once to soak their dehydrated garments of padded wurth in a cave-hidden pool, and then onward again until the shadows on their right grew long and dark.

"It is near," the Aarthman who guided them said. He dismounted. "Here we must leave our maars and proceed on foot if we are to surprise the sarifs."

The little party obeyed, glad of the opportunity to stretch cramped stiff limbs. They followed along a narrow shallow gorge to where it opened into a larger sunken pass. Down there, in a rock-strewn boxlike cavity, they saw movement.

"We are too late," Hardan muttered to Ylida. "Shiny leather shells and metal caps are those of Wetland soldiers. It is they who are trapped in that hollow."

Now they could see the sarifs just below their own vantage point. They clustered at either end of the cliff-walled trap, their arrows and the jagged boulders they had collected effectively barring any attempt by the soldiers to cut their way through. Already more than half the Tarnish fighting men were down, and it was but a matter of time until the last of them died.

Further to the east, in a stream-watered little park, the wagons were bulked in a rude circle. They were fewer now, less than thirty were left of the original train, and they were patched and travel-stained.

"We had better divide, Kern Rensom," said Hardan thoughtfully. "You take ten

men and take cover above the western party. I will take the others to capture the wagons and the other party."

"Good," agreed the little man from Aarth, and he started issuing orders at once.

Taking advantage of whatever cover the broken nature of the uplands afforded, the Aarthmen and the Wetlanders slipped downward toward the sarifs. Nor were they detected before they had reached a bulging ridge of flinty red rock twenty feet above them.

Hardan cupped his hands and shouted down at the fifteen ragged men below, "Throw down your weapons, sarifs. You are surrounded."

The men turned, startled, to look upward into the eyes of twenty strange little men and the two Wetlanders. Nor could they fail to see the arrows that centered on their vitals. One by one they loosed their bows and spears, their nerveless fingers twitching.

Nowhere could Hardan see Nitka Porn, though he counted five of the rebel sarif's immediate underlings in the group.

"Where is Nitka Porn?" he demanded.

The sarifs stirred uneasily, their sullen green eyes shifting and their tongues dabbing at blackened cracked lips. They were a hopeless, stupid-looking crowd. From them the Drylands had sapped their strength and sucked dry their brains. Nor had the browbeating of Nitka Porn been without influence in this final result.

One of them, a broken-toothed oldster who feared the rebel sarif the less because he was so near to death, stepped clumsily forward.

"He is at the wagons, Hardan." The reedy old voice trembled. "So securely were the soldiers trapped that he knew they must die. He went for wagons to carry the loot."

"Good, Vesko Rok," said Hardan. "Now I would ask you more. Come aside with me."

The old sarif shuffled after Hardan out of earshot of the others. Quickly he demanded the names of all the sarifs loyal to Nitka Porn in this and the other group. Then he gave orders to separate the prisoners.

"Nolson," he said to one of the sturdy little men of Aarth, "I want you to re-

main here with ten men. Guard well these seven sarifs."

The Aarthman's blue eyes were bright. "They will not escape," he said.

"The others we are taking back to the wagon train," Hardan told him, and set out along the rugged path down toward the camp.

NITKA PORN came riding out of the camp with two others of his men. They were all three fat and healthy-looking. They had fared better than the rest of the party, riding much of the day in the tank baths of the wagons and eating the best of the food.

Behind them rolled three wagons, the teams of bony maars pulling them driven by women. Apparently all the able-bodied sarif males had been forced to join the ambushers.

When they came opposite the Aarthmen and the sarif prisoners stepped out from their concealing boulders and rocks, the show of weapons by the little hairless men of Aarth sufficient to make the whole force seem armed.

"I want you, Nitka Porn," Hardan's voice was slow, his pent-up rage well under control.

The huge sarif's freckled face was mottled with fear and hatred. His yellowish-green eyes were baleful as he swung down from the saddle. Hardan's ears heard a rush of feet and then a ghastly series of shrieks and thuddings, and from the corner of his eye saw the other two horses were now riderless. The sarifs were trampling at something underfoot and the Aarthmen were turning away pale sickened faces from what was there.

Ylda's hand was on his arm. "Take him prisoner," she begged. "Tarnish justice will punish him. And he is so big, so brutal—you will be killed!"

Hardan pushed gently at her arm. Nitka Porn was a spear's length away now and his swords were drawn. Then, before Hardan could stop her, Ylda had stepped between them.

"Surrender your weapons, Nitka Porn," she commanded imperiously, "and you will live to see Ala."

Nitka's flat-nosed simian face snarled. "Surrender and be torn apart as were they?" His head nodded toward the mum-

bling knot of crazed sarifs beside the terrified maars. He laughed hoarsely, and with one great arm swept the girl close.

One of his swords now pressed against the breast of Yida, ready to plunge deep into her vitals. He backed again toward his maar.

"At the first sign of attack," he told Hardan, "the woman dies."

He prepared to climb into the saddle, to ride away into the eastern uplands that led toward the Desert of Niid and the Bitter Sea that had been their goal. And then it was that Hardan remembered the strange power of the Aarthmen.

No sooner had the thought been born in his brain than the little men chuckled and their dejected faces brightened. Nitka Porn's body froze immobile and slowly he spread his arms so the girl stepped free.

"Enough," Hardan called. "Release him and let him fight for his life."

"Better that we should make him slice his own throat," muttered one of the Aarthmen, but unwillingly they complied.

And after a moment the dazed sarif picked up his dropped swords and faced the unmoving Wetlander's gauntness. Trapped at last he was and like a cornered sorap with broken wings he launched himself at Hardan.

Their swords met, clashed and sparks flew from their slithering blades. They broke and circled again, each wary for an opening that the other could not parry. Again and again the four swords rasped, yet from neither man was any blood drawn, so evenly were they matched. Nitka Porn's reach was the longer, but his bulk slowed down his speed, and it was here that Hardan saw his advantage.

Slowly he must wear down the big man, and the dry air that the huge Wetlander was not yet accustomed to breathing would do the rest. He would weaken, grow clumsy, and then his blade would find an opening.

But this Nitka Porn must have sensed. He swung his swords in a veritable hurricane of chopping steel and bore Hardan back against the rearing maars of the foremost wagon. A maar's forefoot lashed out, numbing Hardan's left shoulder, and the apish sarif's face glowed with devilish

satisfaction. The success of his strategy so pleased him that he dropped his guard momentarily.

It was the opening Hardan needed. Gritting his teeth against the pain and numbness of his bruised shoulder he lunged upward with his left sword and his other blade darted in lightning strokes at the sarif's middle. His left hand jarred limply from the sword grip, but Nitka Porn staggered backward dying, the sword piercing deep into his eye-socket.

"Well done!" a hearty voice cried, and he turned to face a leather-husked captain of the Tarnish Guard with his remaining five men.

Yida gave a little cry and in a moment was in the soldier's arms. A hot wave of jealousy burned within Hardan and then was gone.

"It is my father!" she cried gladly...

THE SUN was high overhead when they rode toward the crater valley of the Aarthmen where they were to spend another hand of days before guiding the wagon train on its way to the Bitter Sea. And now their purpose was to establish a treaty between Aarthmen and Wetlanders. Nor did Hardan fear that his small friends would receive any but fair treatment—their ability to read minds guarded them against that common failing of expanding races, to take what they wanted by treachery.

"We will guide the train to the Bitter Sea," he told Yida as he loosed her from her bonds. "Some day all the Wetlands will be ours, and the men of Aarth will rule the Drylands, and ships-that-fly will link us together."

"But until then the trek must go on. Along this trail we are marking out other wagons will follow until a great road stretches here. There will be lakes and underground hostels along the way, and our children will travel in varth-insulated wagons without maars, wagons faster than the wind."

"It was so on Aarth, their legends declare, and so it will be with us."

Yida pouted. "What do we care about Aarth and treks?" she demanded. She nestled closer and her eyes closed contentedly.

(Continued from page 2)

I liked Damon Knight's *The Third Little Green Man*, although his priceless squib in *The Feature Flash* was miles ahead of it. Haggard's *Task of Tau* was okay, and the Big Eye plate was nice. The rest we shall let rest in peace. Nothing to say, said competently.

Going back to our theme of a few paragraphs back, I need with interest the first *PLANET* cover, back in the winter of 1939. Gadzooks, there's a scantily-clad female in the clutches of some hideous, unspeakable, horrible, leering THINGS! Ah, but wait! Coming to the rescue is Bright Boy, replete with muscles and squirt gun. Did he make it? Who knows? Or cares? How fine it is, in the enlightened summer of 1948, to see the change that has taken place on the cover! Now, cold and unemotional in our maturity, we have a really intelligent painting on the cover.

He's cracked up! I knew it would happen someday. He's in college now—maybe that's astute. Now, the guy's nutty as a fruit-cake. . . .

In *La Vizi* (sigh), first to Sandison—bravoo! Next Tom Pace, and then a tie between Perry and Clements. Jack, you are my boy!

Sir Editor, you will no doubt raise a stink by printing Sigler's latest blather, and that thing by Cox. It does little or no good to argue with such people; you cannot eradicate the cheap falsehoods of centuries of misguided thought with a well-turned phrase, much less a scientific truth. It is a little disconcerting to realize that such as they enjoy science fiction—it is a definite exclamation point to the notion that a little more thought should be indulged in before the atom bombs start to fly. It's good to print the prejudices of a Cox and the warped thinking of a Sigler; the signposts that lead to war serve also another function—they enable one to choose another path.

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER

LEEPING COSTRORESS

2062 Santa Ana St.
South Gate, Calif.

Dear Editor:

And did anyone ever tell you you are a good show-man, you genius? I speak not of the work you are payed for, but the *Viz*. (If you get payed for that you cheat. That would be a labor of love to me.) I refer mainly to the last letter in the Summer issue, by my friend Cox. And also the caption. I couldn't think of a better name (that's printable) for it than "columbian," and of course you weren't referring to the town.

Paul and I have written often-on-on for some time. And we agreed not to talk politics or race questions. Merely because it would lead to hard feeling. But as he has come out in the open, I feel I can too.

First of all Paul, as Sandison point out so well the so called white race has not been top dog so long. And there is no reason to believe that it will always remain so. So I see no reason to feel so d—— superior. If a atomic war comes off about all that will be left is a few Hindos and bush-men, and Indians (S. American).

As for some races being superior, that is something your old man told you. You neaver figured it out. As some once pointed out no child is born with prejudices, they are taught him. There is nothing as unprejudiced as a baby.

And as for races living together. Ha. You look in the wrong place. Take Los Angeles, (or N. Y.)

We have lots of whites, of all kind. And we have negros, Mexicans, Chinese, Filipinos, Japs, and a little of everything. And we seem to get along alright. We can ride in the same street car with out coming down with the Leeping costroress, or something, as our Southern cousins seem too.

And when I was going to the handicapped school (I have asthma.) There were kids from all races. And the most popular boy in school



"Here we are the masters!"

was of Mexican decent. And one of the most agreeable was a negro. And one of the cutest girls was Chinese. And the most disliked boy was a white.

Paul calls fans impractical and starry eyed. Maybe it comes from looking at the stars, huh! Anyway if you mean we believe in giving everyone an even break, and judging him on his personal merit, then I plead guilty. It maybe impractical, but I have always dreamed of a world at peace under one government. And you can't have that if a few (comparatively) stupid men believe one color of skin, or way of parting the hair is better than anyone else.

As for alien races, I can't say. I know we couldn't get along with them if people like Paul had anything to do with it. But then I doubt that what we think will matter much. If we meet any intelligent life it will most likely be inter-stellar. And if so, they will rather be friendly and we will have to be; or war like, and we will become slaves. I can see no possible way we could hope to match anyone with brains enough to make a steller drive. But then maybe a few visitors have been here and seen what a goah-awful mess the world is in and left. I know I would.

Stories and stuff were good as per usual.

Cover had something on it that no other PS cover has had.

Knight's story most unusual. A drunken, yellow, muttonous car beats his three honest, heroic friends and runs off to the enemy. What oh what is sf coming to. Next think you will really have Mars blow up Earth. Oh, I believe you did. God, what a state. Only a old fan(?) would think of doing it.

To you, O Cox, I say, why is there strife between different races? Simple. It's because of conceited bigots like you, and not the difference itself. Take the heathen Chinese. He sends not his scholars to war (as we do), he persecutes not his minorities (as do we), he derides not those who are inferior or unfortunate (as do we, upon all occasions) but pities them. And we, who are superior, for a reason I never could figure out, scorn them for their "starry-eyed" tendencies.

I have noticed that it is the criminal who locks his door at night; the hypocrite who cries "hypocrisy"; the bigot who is the first to squeal when he feels pressure; so the "superior" race's tendency is to suspect others of the things they do themselves, and never think the other might be moved by kindness or friendliness, as this is the farthest from his own thoughts. So before we, who are superior, judge those about us, let us first let them judge us.

Enough of this subject. It's like trying to convince a deaf man who has got it into his head that people move their mouths because they have worms in their jaws, and is glad he doesn't have any.

More about SIPs. Even if Clements (who lives by selling dandruff) says I'm not as funny as I usually am, I refuse to quit. There are worthwhile things; PLANET, death, and torture, which can be summed up in one word: WIMMIN!

Having given myself ideas, I now leave you-all.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

JOHN VAN COTTENBERG



WHY THEY DON'T GIVE US MORE PAPER

Violent Ward,
Latin Academy

DEAR PLANET'S MAN:

I no righting good. I reading O. K. I reading all pitchers good in you book. Read pitchers in in bed, smoking all same time. Go sleep smoking, wake up in Fear Of Time wit Pillar On Fire. Now read in Z-Day time.

I look with my Big Eye, tell about pitchers in your book. Ole spaggetty hed on page 101, him not look like reel peoples. No eye-balls. Pitchur

on page 77; long, blond hair man wit dragon tail around him. What he carry on chest? O excuse. Am seeing now wit red faces. O. K. nev mind. O. K. I sed!

You taking big tip see? Taking frunt cover with gurl in like blub off. Her got saur face anyway. Im seeing faces only. Taking also back covers off. Now putting back covers on frunt of you book. Putting in with pritty termities girl outside. Taking frunt cover and putting it on you back side. Back side of book, I meaning. Make print works on pitcher wit red devils on, saying like "If you seeing like this, joining al-kaholicks anommomus." Now you goting termities girl making woo woo on cuver, aliso nev avertiser. Much gooder.

I looking last on pitcher on back. She saying "Hey!" like she meaning play. He saying "G'way" like he old an grey. Me saying "What he is, got rocks in bed!"

I goting to stop now. Trying make tipeing riter flying like roket ships. Crash! Man he coming in wit warm sweater. He taking away tiper. He putting warm sweater on I. Sumthing funny. Look, no hands. Goo bye. You welcum.

Yous

B. E. M.

Note: The above is by a regular contributor, who is apparently playing some kind of game. You can vote for him—just as if he were human. Ed.)

PLAY BALL!

Hartwick, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Manager Payne juggled his lineup, putting his two proven stars, Fox and Bradbury, into the game against the rookie pitcher, Hamilton. The stadium was packed, and the Authors, being the home club, were the team that the fans were cheering. Payne sent the team mascot, Dorothy de Courcy, to the third base coaching box and took the one at first himself. The rookie stepped into the box, took his warmup pitches, and prepared to face the Authors.

Simmons was the Authors' leadoff man, and he swung a fairly long bat labeled *Z-Day in Cenfowri*. But Simmons forgot that he wasn't playing the Detectives, and an outfielder gathered in his well-hit fly ball.

That brought Knight up, carrying a thing labeled *The Third Little Green Man*. But he popped mildly to the infield, and the rookie heaved a sigh of relief. But he should have known better than to do that against this bunch.

Bradbury carried a long bat that he called a *Pillar of Fire*. The rookie pitched. *Ooops!* A very dejected rookie looked out to where the ball was just vanishing over the grandstand roof.

Brittain was next, with a *Murderer's Base*. But he, like Simmons, thought he was playing the Detectives, and he grounded to the infield. And that was the first frame . . .

But he still had more batters to face. When the Authors came in, Bjarne Kirchhoff was up, with a *Day of Wrath* stored up against brash young rookies. And this rookie was not quite 20. Kirchhoff teed off against a fast ball, and drove it deep into the outfield for three bases.

Pelkie was next, and he was in *The Sphere of Time*. He tied into a pitch and drove it against the scoreboard for a double.

John de Courcy was next, with *Gomez's Fel-*

icles. The rookie grinned and set the veteran down on strikes.

That brought J. Harvey Haggard up, with a *Task of Tow*. He slapped a hit through the infield, bringing Felicie home.

Fox was next, and the infield dropped back for a double play. But the veteran star got his pet bat, *Werewolf of the Crystal Crypt*, solidly against the pitch. Ten rows up in the bleachers an excited fan caught the ball, and the score was 5-0.

That was enough. The manager stepped to the front of the dugout and waved the rookie from the mound. He turned to the reliefer, handed him the ball, and said, "Guess I kind of messed this one up," and walked into the dugout, knowing that it would be three months before he got another chance, if it ever came, to pitch against Manager Payne's powerhouse . . .

Not bad, Payne, not bad at all. Five runs in an inning and a third. You sure juggled that lineup beautifully. I guess I got overconfident against Bradbury, maybe because *Defense Mech*, *Million-Year Picnic*, *Rocket Summer*, and *Zero Hour*, among others, were such monumental flops. But I should have remembered *Lovely of the Red Mist*, *Creature That Time Forgot*, and *Jonah of the Jove-Ron*. But against Fox there was no excuse for anybody getting cocky. What the batter did in the above reflects my opinion of the story. I always figure the story will be lousy. That way, I'm usually pleasantly surprised.

Query: Where in hell are Kuttner and Hassel? They usually turn out a good story, either of them, and no, wait a minute, I'll correct that. Hassel more often than not turns out a good story, but Kuttner has on more than one occasion turned out a super-classic.

Well, I guess that covers the subject. Oh, wait a minute, I almost forgot to rate La Vici. So here goes. Gilliland, Zimmer, Pace, in that order. And now, goodbye. See you in three months, Paul.

Yours until you have a cover dame that looks like a nun (from her costume, that is.)

JAMES E. HAMILTON, JR.

BANNER FROM BANNING

495 N. Third St.,
Banning, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

Glancing over the newest PS (I'll read it sooner or later) I see some amusing letter headings by you—"Our Favorite Heroin," to name one. Then I come to "A Columbian Speaks," and I remember the name of a subversive organization called The Columbians . . . and I read the letter under it, and I reach the conclusion that you were entirely right in so characterizing it. "Flap-Jawed Hyenas" was aptly placed—it characterized all the letters that followed it. (Now, now, I simply picked a cute phrase from the letter—Ed.)

It is indeed unfortunate that nothing can be done to rid fandom—and the world, for that matter—of such people as Cox—and, were any sort of a ban or boycott possible, I would certainly be the first to support it. I'm glad Cox voiced his opinions at this stage of the game; it enables us to see him for what he is, and be warned about possible future dealings with him.

I'm still nauseated, dammit! Who was the halfwit who said fans were broadminded? With men like Cox in fandom . . . ugh. The type

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of broad mental horizons for which Hitler, to name the first example to come to mind, was noted.

Let's hope enough of your readers blow off steam to kick Cox where it hurts. I would suggest you make some sort of editorial reply to such letters when you decide to print them. We would respect you for it.

DON WILSON

(By what God-given right would we editorialize? or bow?—Ed.)



"Er—any trees on the moon?"

REMEMBERS WHEN—

Box 204,
Hartshorne, Oklahoma

DEAR EDITOR:

It has been many a long year—five or six, I think—since I last wrote to *PLANET*. There was a time when I wrote every issue. I had a few letters published, and I won a couple of originals. I was excited and thrilled, and just a trifle astonished. I believe, now, that letters-to-the-editor departments are useless things, hardly worth the space they occupy. But when I remember the terrific bang I used to get out of seeing my letters in print—well, I'm glad there's still a *Vizigraph*. Younger readers are entitled to the same thrill.

As I write I have before me the Summer, 1948, issue of *PLANET*. Front cover, stories, illustrations—I find it well worth the twenty cents it cost. I am trying to lead up to a bit of nostalgic remembering, but I want to make it clear that I don't feel that *PLANET* is slipping, or that the "good old days" were better than the present. However, some of the high spots of the past are well worth recalling.

As the forever-tops cover, I want to nominate one by A. Leydenfrost. I forget the exact date, but old timers will remember it. It was a Spring Issue, I think 1942. (Right.—Ed.) Anyway, it was a huge head, a beautiful thing in a horrible sort of way.

I nominate Binder's novel, *Fossils of the Morning World* as the best yet. Some critic once said

of Binder that he "ground out" his stories. Well, this one certainly isn't hack. It's the all-time clump. (Published about 1941.) (Fall 1st.—Ed.)

If I'm vague about dates, it's because I let a younger fan have most of my back copies of *PLANET*. But about 1940 or '41 you published a novelet that I'm nominating for the tops in it's class—Ross Rocklynne's *Exiles of the Desert Star*. (Spring, 1941.—Ed.)

Nominating a short story as the best ever published in *PLANET* is tough. But I'm going to try. Remember the Fall 1940 issue? Neil R. Jones had a little beauty in that one. *Herald of Saturn's Ring*.

Some splendid artists have done your inside illustrations down through the years. Paul, Leydenfrost, Lynch, Morey and so on. But for weird, clear-cut, eye-catching tops I nominate Bok, especially the pic on page 104 of the Summer, 1941, issue.

The best letter ever published in *Vix*, bar none, was written by Guy Gifford, and was published in the winter, 1941-42 issue. Gifford was carrying on a feud with Asimov. I quote, "One of my friends . . . stepped into a phone booth, dialed 'Operator,' then accidentally belched into the phone and got Asimov."

Finn's "pyuth-feather" gag was probably the best ever printed in *Vix*, with Bill Stoy's "Tall-Stoy" a close second.

PLANET has a wonderful past to remember, and a splendid future to anticipate. This little session of remembering has been a lot of fun, and maybe it will prove something different for the readers. If I live, I'll probably write again in ten years or so to say, "You certainly printed some swell stories in 1948. Them were the good old days!"

Sincerely,

JAMES R. GRAY

THAT'S SHAWL, BROTHER

Big Springs Farm,
Freeport, Illinois

DEAR EDITOR:

The Red Witch undulated leggily into the editor's sacred sanctum. Her transparent gown of Venetian silk clung to every curving curve. Her moist scarlet lips parted as she breathed huskily, "Alone at last!" With the piercing shriek of a Maritain hawk deprived of its prey, the editor leaped up. Faced with the deadliest menace the system knew . . . the deadly allure of the fabled Red Witch. Faced with this evil glamour . . . faced with his soul's destruction . . . could he resist it? Was he man or rodent? Continued in the next issue of *Spicy Solar*.

PLANET authors get away with it. Why can't I? And don't every one start yelling at once. But take *Sphere of Time*. Aw go on and take it. I haven't read anything so lush and sultry since I loaned out my only copy of *Amber*. Where, pull down the shades, momma. Papa's coming home tonight. But leave us tear our minds from these voluptuous volumes and turn our mighty intellects on something more refined, to wit, *Filler of Fire*. If ever a novel deserved that much abused and overworked word "classic," this is the one. What a superb jewel. A scintillating study in haunting terror . . . written in stardust. Ray Bradbury has joined the immortals in my personal pantheon. I would say that he writes like an inspired angel save that his works are more on the side of the demons.

Departing with a lingering glance at Pillar we approach *Crystal Crypt*. Braving Gardner's flaming anger, we ask in a plaintive voice, "Was he trying to make a deadline?" This had all the ingredients to make a wonderful novel, but somewhere along the line it flopped on its, er, crypt. Altho the poet hath it that there is nothing more damning than faint praise, still I say that Mr. Fox has a flair for action.

Z-Day has no zip, no sparkle, no fang. 'Nuff said. Why be completely uncharitable?

Dismissing the shorts with a languid wave of the hand, we hurry to the cover. One futuristic Petty in a glass bottle, two beams and a beam. From the pained expression the gal wears (and from where I sit that is about all she wears) some nasty beam must have stolen her last stick of Dentyne.

The flaming portals of La Vizl loom ahead. We enter and stand in awed silence before Mr. Perry's polished vocabulary. And what a beautiful lecture on, er, just what was it on, Hoff? The Mad Martian rides again. Three cheers, another Southerner has joined the union. Mr. Gilliland, hasn't your mother told you anything yet? Tek, tek, Mr. Sigler, such language in front of ladies. Flap-jawed byenas yet. Mr. Cox, if this wasn't a family mag, I could say things to you, but . . . The great moment has approached. V. Shawl casts her votes. Reading left to right, Zimmer, Perry and Pace get the nod.

Once again we retire into the brooding solitude of our, ahem, country estate. We brood darily to ourselves while filing our claws. Heh, heh, we snicker thinking of the next issue of PLANET and more quivering flesh to rend. Farewell.

"The Red Witch"

VIRGINIA L. SHAWL

STILL LEADING WITH HIS CHIN

1028 N. Broadway,
Wichita 5, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

The stories weren't too bad in this issue, although I think it is about time that you abandoned the naked-dame story. The barber yarn was good, not only because it had a novel twist, but also because the author showed an understanding of the mental makeup of primitive peoples. As far as Ray Bradbury's story is concerned I feel that, if his mind is anything like his story, I wouldn't trust him behind my back.

As far as the lead novel was concerned it could have been made better by leaving out the over-worked evil corporation theme. The author shows an abysmal ignorance of what a corporation is and how it works. As a matter of history, it is the rabble that causes the trouble anyhow. There were a couple of points of interest in the story for me. They were accelerating at twenty gravities, yet the pilot went to sleep and when he woke up they were doing 400 miles a second. At 20 gravities they would have reached that speed in 3300 seconds or less than an hour. Then when they took off at four gravities they had to face blaster beams before they reached the Heavyside layer at about twenty miles. If they had maintained that acceleration instead of increasing it, they would have reached Heavyside in less than 45 seconds. I doubt if they could see a ship taking off, run a Gieger test on it, challenge it by radio, on receiving no reply swing a blaster beam on the target and let go in that short space of time.

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It was also an interesting point about the colonists being unarmed because they had to use firearms while the other side was armed with atomics. Since a modern rifle can clip a person at a mile and does not give away its location as an atomic blast would, for the type of war they were waging the colonists were actually better armed than the mercenaries were.

Now to answer a few critics. Boff Perry intimates that I hang around poolhalls. As a matter of fact I don't even know how to play either pool or billiards. Again he shows a lamentable ignorance of the English language when he jumps me for disbelieving in various scientific theories and also the possibility of rayguns. Long ago I said that I merely believed, on the basis of certain evidence I had, that firearms would never be entirely outmoded by ray pistols as they had certain advantages that would make them still practicable far in the future.

I also said that these theories were only theories and had never been positively proved. Therefore, I merely objected to having them put out as fact and statements proved or disproved by the theory. In fact, many scientists hold that these theories are not entirely correct and wait for actual proof before acceptance. Personally, I will accept the fact of a spacewarp when Mr. Einstein can produce one that you can examine. Until then, I will withhold judgment. I don't mind a person disagreeing with me as long as they stick to what I actually said but I object to having false statements put into my mouth.

Incidentally, a theoretical scientist is the most impractical person in the world. Upon discovering something he immediately tries to fit it into a preconceived theory and as a result frequently comes a cropper.

The theory of phlogiston won fame for its originator until some blasted scissorbill discovered oxygen. So, every once in a while theory and fact collide head on and when they do theory gets a wov of a headache. As far as my mathematics are concerned, I can make out my own income tax and even Einstein has trouble doing that.

I doubt if climate has much to do with races. Many of these lesser races wind up in more temperate climates, yet they are no more vigorous mentally than they were before. On the other hand, a white man in a tropical country yet retains his mental vigor.

As far as these ancient civilizations are concerned you cannot prove anything by them because the races that built them are not the races that occupy those lands now. They are merely mongrel descendants of the builder races. Many scientists hold that the conqueror race mixed its blood with the slave race until its strength and vigor were so attenuated that their descendants could no longer recover from any disaster. Therefore, the great civilization fell apart because the people could no longer hold it together. These same scientists have also warned that if there is a wholesale dilution of the white blood by the Negro race the same thing will happen and there will no longer be a United States.

If there were no difference in races you would not find any difference in the way in which they live. However, they differ as much as individuals do. The great instinct to go with your own kind is stronger than any sob-sister theory and anyone who attempts to interfere is playing with fire.

Respectfully yours,

EDWIN SMILER

A MAINE-IAC SPEAKS

4 Spring Street,
Lubec, Maine

DEAR EDITOR:

Once again I venture to write a letter to the VIZIGRAPH. Only this time on a typewriter. It helps, doesn't it?

First we have the cover. Eeeyoooww! Grrish, What?!! How about having Grass do one for a change? He must be getting tired of JUNGLE STORIES. He did a couple of swell covers for PS a few years ago. What're the chances? How about it, huh?

Now, let's tear the stories to pieces. With 100% enjoyment as goal, here's how the stories rated.

Pillar of Fire. Ahh . . . Bradbury's done it again! This rates a whopping 90% on the enjoyment meter. If I knew where he lives, I'd stand up and bow three times in that direction. (*Southern California*.—Ed.) But I don't, so I bowed in the general direction of PLANET's offices. (*Well, okay*.—Ed.) I know it would have ruined Bradbury's original idea, but I wish Lantry had killed that guy when he first found him at the morgue. Oh, well . . .

Z-Day on Centaury. Hmmm . . . this Henry T. Simmons is a regular Emmett McDowell. And that's good! This nice rip-roaring space opera (well, not quite!) gets around 88% on the meter. I hope to see more by this writer.

Wormhole of the Crystal Crypt. 85%. Good ol' Fox. He came up with another of his super-being stories, with plenty of alien science and fighting. It's getting so that PS wouldn't be the same without him. But he's never quite equaled the first story he had in PS.

In the Sphere of Time. 84%. This one almost snuck up on Fox's story. It was filled with plenty of monsters, fighting, women and blood and guts. Hmmm . . . what's J. W. doing out of . . . cops . . . ah, the other mag?

All the shorts were pretty good. Damon Knight's story was amosin' but not as good as *Doorway to Kjal Mar*. It got 70%. *Murderer's Base* was much better. 80%. Another new name I see. Good! *Day of Wrath* is just the author's vehicle to express his opinion of the shape the world is in today and of the human(?) race. Well, the story wasn't any too good, but the author is darn right! 80% is the rating. *Gone's Politics* was a cute lil story. 75%. So the de Courcneys have made PLANET. Good. *Tark of Tau*. 80%. Short little yarn. It got the author's idea over, but that's all. But I liked it.

Pics, next. Boy, can that man McWilliams draw! Or paint, or whatever. He's the best artist that ever hit PLANET. Well, almost! Potter was doing all right before ya stuck him away in JUNGLE, and then there were a couple of other pretty good ones working on PS's pics. But I'm satisfied. Hey! This guy, Meilink, isn't so bad. Keep him and McWilliams and I'll be satisfied all the time. Best in the mag was the *Big Eye* pic. Then the one on pages 4 and 5. Oh, foo! Space is narrowing down, so I'll dispense with the separate pic ratings. They were all pretty good, though. Meilink's on page 107 was swell.

Now we march bravely into the VIZIGRAPH. O.K., have your way! Crept fearfully into the VIZI. Lessee . . . Short as it is, it's still hard to choose. Mmmmm . . . Marion Zimmer cops smitah wun place. Tom Pace in second. (Glad

my reading list, and once was the top, when Brackett, Bond, and de Pina used to grace her lovely pages. Ah, those were the days. Bradbury is better than any of them, but he is a lone voice. Bradbury is magnificent and a few other things which I won't say because all know his worth. I suppose you also know that he won third place in the O. Henry short story awards for 1947, and his story was praised as far better than the two above it.

After that brief pause we will return to criticism.

(4) Too much sex has reared its head in recent issues. This never happened before. My second favorite author, McDowell, is responsible for a lot of the sex and it ruins his stories for me when he gets too bold. The covers have always been a call for high brow passersby to say, "just spicy back." But the fans could always smile and know that within those covers was fine fiction. Now we are a little less bold in declaring the merits of the cleanness of the yarns.

While on covers I would like to compliment Anderson on a nice job for the Summer. Winter, however, was close to the worst ever. McWilliams is great on the illos, but where are Leiden-frost and Kielme and Moore?

The Viz is not bad this trip, but too much science theorizing for me. Give illos to Clements, Wigodsky, and Acker, in that order. I like their type of letter.

As for the stories, I have only read about half of them, but *Pillar of Fire* looks like a sure pacer. *2-Day on Centauri* is good, too. I hope Fox is good. I have never enjoyed his stuff and would like to, since he gets in so much.

Thank you,
MILLARD GRIGGS

MOST UNKINDEST CUT OF ALL

1822 Bathgate Avenue,
Bronx 57, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

I got the latest PS today and, while the ink was very good (as usual), a few of the letters in the *Vinograph* burned me up no end. I refer especially to Paul D. Cox's moronic blitherings about racial superiority. So I have put the whole thing in the form of a parable and I hope his little mind can understand it.

SUPERIORITY —a parable—

John P. Jones used to be a very good friend of mine. Before he started "thinking," of course. I remember how it all started. One night we were coming home from a play, and he turned to me, and said, "Joe, I've been thinking."

"A penny for your thoughts," I said.

"No, I'm serious, Joe. Have you ever stopped to think how much more superior the white race is over all the others? Why, just stop and think about it for a moment, and you'll see I'm right. Look at the colored people—what have they ever accomplished? And the yellow ones?"

Well, I tried my best. I explained about the climate, and the environment, and how even then some exceptional people had managed to rise above these things and produce masterpieces. I mentioned Confucius, and Booker T. Washington and many other great men, but John wouldn't listen.

And after a while, I noticed that John had stopped speaking to all his former Negro and Chinese friends.

Well, the next step was obvious, John became convinced that he was a pure Aryan. So naturally, he cut all his non-Aryan friends. I met him on the street one day, and he just ignored me. I didn't see him for quite a while after that.

I next heard of him from a doctor I knew. It seems that John had become convinced that only his religious sect was the true one. So, he abandoned all his other acquaintances except those who went to the same church.

After a while he disagreed with his pastor and he stopped going to church. And he quit his job, because his boss was a member of that sect.

He didn't go out much, for there wasn't much to do. Instead, he stayed home and played with his children. And one day his wife noticed that he was looking at her rather strangely. You see, he had decided that women were inferior, too. So he got a divorce.

Well, after the divorce there was even less to do. His wife had custody of the children, so he didn't even have them to play with. Of course, he had a lot of time to think . . .

And it occurred to him that his left arm was really much inferior to his right one. So he took a meat-cleaver, and . . .

At the inquest, the coroner said that the autopsy showed that he died from loss of blood.

I hope certain bigots get the idea.

Yours sincerely,
JOE SCHRAUMBURGER

WANTS BRADBURY TO CHEER UP

R. F. D. 1,
Wakefield, R. I.

DEAR EDITOR:

I feel impelled most strongly to write my opinion of the story, *Pillar of Fire*, published in the Summer Issue of *PLANET STORIES*.

First, I would like, in all fairness, to say I consider it a wonderfully well written and dramatic piece of work, by a very good author, who, if he had directed his talents in this case into a different channel would have created a greater influence for wholesome reading and mental good, in the class of readers who choose such magazines as yours.

Properly speaking, this story belongs to the "weird" or "unknown" type of publication, rather than your own, and is for those lovers of Poe, Coleridge, Lovecraft, and others like them.

As writers I respect and admire them, but as good and wholesome influences for mental health and normal, well-balanced thinking, I cannot approve or accept them.

It is the dreamer, the idealist, the embryo inventor, the future's great minds, the coming scientists, who choose in their youth, of this present day, the kind of magazine you print; and a story like *Pillar of Fire* is not good or beneficial for any one, much less people like these.

The psychological effect, even though it may not be realized by the reader, is morbid and detrimental, and it is a great pity that a man who can write as well as this author has not written a far better story than this one.

Yours in sincere protest,
A. M. WILKINS